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THOU ART THE MAN

A Nobel

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"ISHMAEL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THOU ART THE MAN.



CHAPTER I.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

THERE were great black masses of cloud in the cold grey above, and a misty darkness brooded over the shoulder of the moor as the barouche, with its fine, up-standing greys, came swinging round the curve of the road leading to Killander Castle—a more luxurious carriage than is generally to be met with in such a desolate region as Killander Moor—but this carriage belonged to a lady whose importance filled the land to the farthest limit of moor and valley, and away to the edge of yonder distant sea, whose leaden waves were edged with livid spray

at this sunset hour of a stormy October afternoon.

The lady—Sibyl, Countess of Penrith—was sitting alone in her carriage, wrapped in dark fur, with a proud, clearly cut face showing pale between the sable of her close-fitting toque and the sable collar of her long velvet mantle. Her eyes had a dreamy look as they surveyed the desolate landscape, the undulating sweep of moorland, the distant grey of the sea. The droop of the sensitive lips suggested mournful thoughts, or it might be only a pensive reverie in harmony with the sullen atmosphere, and the dark monotony of the landscape.

Suddenly, out of the very ground, as it seemed to Lady Penrith, a rough, unkempt looking man came running after the carriage. The footman looked round at him, as if he had been a dog, and took no further heed than he would have taken of a dog. The coachman drove steadily on, touching the muscular shoulders of his sleek greys daintily with the

point of his whip, quickening the pace as the sky darkened.

The man came running on, giving chase to the carriage, and waving an arm in a ragged fustian sleeve.

“Stop,” cried Lady Penrith, and the coachman pulled up his horses, in the midst of the bleak, bare moor, and the footman alighted from the box and came to the carriage door, touching his hat with gloved fingers, mute image of obedience and subserviency.

“That man wants to speak to me,” said her ladyship. “Wait.”

The vagabond’s footsteps drew near. He was at the carriage door in less than three minutes, breathless and hoarsely panting, with a sound like the grating of rusty iron. He looked like a shepherd out of employment, ragged, gaunt, hungry-eyed.

“Are you Lady Penrith?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered her ladyship, with her purse open in her hand, having only one

idea as to the man's motive in following her carriage.

Beggars were rare on that moorland road, but this man was evidently a beggar, she thought; and not being a political economist, her first impulse was to relieve him.

He said never a word, but fumbled under the ragged shirt which hardly hid his lean breast, and brought forth a folded scrap of paper, which he flung into the lady's lap, then turned and ran away—across the moor this time, as fast as he had run after the carriage three minutes before.

“Follow him,” said Lady Penrith to the footman, and the footman went tripping and stumbling over the stony moor, nearly falling down at every second step.

The hungry vagabond vanished into the dim grey of evening before the over-fed lackey in his buckled shoes had gone fifty yards across that uneven ground.

He came back, breathlessly apologetic, and

explained the impossibility of catching a man who ran like a rabbit.

“Do you know who he is, or where he comes from?”

“No, my lady. Never saw him before, to my knowledge.”

“There is no village in that direction nearer than Cargill, and that is three miles off. He must have come from Cargill, I suppose. A beggar, no doubt. That will do, James. Home.”

Home! The word, how often soever she might pronounce it, had always a sound of irony in her ear. What likeness was there between the English ideal of home and Killander Castle, on the Cumbrian moorland; or Penrith House, Berkeley Square; or the Mimosas at Cannes; or the Den, near Braemar; or any habitation owned by Archibald, ninth Earl of Penrith? There are men and women who can create an atmosphere of domestic peace in a log-lut in the Australian bush, or in a lodging-house at

the East End of London. There are others who, among a dozen palaces, cannot make one home.

A pale streak of yellow light on the western edge of the moor showed where the sun had dipped below the horizon. A colder wind blew from the far-off sea, and Lady Penrith shivered as she took up the scrap of soiled paper from her lap, and held it gingerly with the tips of her gloved fingers.

It was less than half a sheet of notepaper. There was only a few pencilled words in two straggling lines along the paper; and those few words were so difficult to decipher that Lady Penrith had to pore over them for a long time in the waning light before she made them into the following sentences:—

“Out of the grave, the living grave, a long-forgotten voice calls to you. Where their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched.”

No signature; no indication of from whom or whence the message came. A madman's scrawl, no doubt inspired by some half-cloudy

purpose in the troubled brain of lunacy. The ragged wretch whom she had taken for a beggar was doubtless some wandering lunatic, harmless, and therefore permitted to ramble about the countryside. A religious enthusiast, perhaps ! The scrap of Scripture pointed that way.

Lady Penrith resolved to drive to Cargill next day and search out the history of the writer, if indeed he lived there, as seemed likely ; unless he were to be found in one of those lonely cottages scattered here and there over the face of the moor, between Penrith and Ardliston, the little seaport whence coal and iron were shipped for the south. A great tract of wild country, broken only by small and solitary hamlets, lay between these two points. The coal mines and smelting works and miners' villages all lay northward of Ardliston. The landscape on this southward side of the little harbour was wild and gloomy, but had a certain stern beauty of its own, and was not disfigured by mining operations of any kind.

Lady Penrith was interested in the troubled mind which had prompted that pencil scrawl. A call to repentance, no doubt; such a summons as the pauper Puritan, seeing rank and beauty roll by in a three-hundred-guinea barouche, not unseldom feels himself called upon to deliver. There was really nothing to wonder at. There was hardly anything exceptional in the incident, unless perhaps it were that the man should have been there in the nick of time, as her ladyship's carriage went by. Yet even that circumstance was easy enough to understand if he were an inhabitant of the district. She drove in that direction often, and as a person of mark in the neighbourhood her habits were doubtless noted and known.

No, there was nothing curious in the incident, nothing worthy of much thought; and yet she thought of nothing else during her homeward drive. She carried the thought with her under the great grey gateway with its iron portcullis; and into the hall, where the atmosphere of

smouldering logs and hothouse flowers had a feeling as of the warm, sweet South she knew so well; and up to her own sitting-room, where the slip of soiled paper lay on her lap as she sipped her solitary cup of tea. His lordship and his lordship's friends had been out shooting all day; her niece—a niece by courtesy—had gone with the luncheon cart, and the lady of Killander Castle had the great mediæval fortress all to herself in the October gloaming.

Presently she drew the lamp nearer, and scrutinised that pencilled scrawl even more closely than before in the bright white light.

"It is not the writing of an uneducated man," she said to herself, and then her head sank lower, as her elbow rested on the cushioned arm of her chair, until her forehead almost touched the slip of paper on the table in front of her. She sat there some minutes, lost in dreamy thought.

"How strange that the hand should be like 'his,'" she murmured. And then after a

pause, "Is it really like, or do I fancy a resemblance because he is so often in my thoughts?"

Then, after another lapse into reverie,

"He was not in my mind to-day. I had other things to think of. I was brooding on the hard realities of life; not upon its losses and regrets."

She took up the paper, and studied it again, noting every stroke of the pencil.

"It is like the writing of the dead," she said at last, with conviction. "The hand which wrote was the hand of a gentleman. I must hunt out the writer. I shall not rest until I find out who and what he is; a madman, no doubt; but should he be in poverty and distress I should like to help him—if it were only because he writes like the dead."

She rose, and went across the room to the large old-fashioned *escritoire*, where most of her letters were written, and where, among numerous pigeon-holes and quaint recesses,

there were two deep drawers, provided with Bramah locks. She unlocked one of these, and dropped the scrap of paper on the top of the neatly-arranged packets of letters, tied with different coloured ribbons—letters which were in some wise the record of a woman's life. There was one of these packets tied with a broad black ribbon.

Lady Penrith stood for a minute or so with the drawer open, looking down at those letters bound with the black band; then she slowly closed the drawer and locked it, and as she turned away from the escritoire her eyes were dim with tears.

That fancied resemblance in a handwriting had been like the lifting of a coffin lid for one last look at the dead face underneath. All the passion and the despair of a long buried past had come back to Sibyl Penrith at the bidding of an unknown lunatic who happened to write like the man to whom she had given her girlish heart ten years ago.

She was sitting in her low chair by the fire, in the shadow of a tall Indian screen, when the door opened suddenly and a rush of fresh air and an exuberant young woman came noisily into the room, and brought the dreamer back in an instant from the past with its fond regrets to the present with its manifold obligations.

“Oh, such a day!” cried the newcomer. “You were better off even in your dreary afternoon drive. I had to wait, and wait, and wait for those men, till I was absolutely ravenous, and the hot dishes were utterly spoilt: I shall never go out with the luncheon cart again, unless I have three or four pretty girls to back me up. Those selfish wretches would be punctual enough then; but they don’t mind reducing poor plain me to the verge of starvation.”

“Poor plain Cora,” said her ladyship, as the girl seated herself at the tea-table and began a spirited attack upon the cakes and buns

which Lady Penrith had left untasted. "Girls who really think themselves plain don't talk about it. They live in the hope that it is a secret between themselves and their looking-glasses."

"Oh, but I am an exception to your rule," protested Miss Urquhart, with her large serviceable mouth full of Scotch bun. "When I was twelve years old I found out the difference between beauty and ugliness. I heard all the pretty little girls admired—'such blue eyes, such long lashes, such dear little mouths, such lily and rose complexions, and lovely golden hair,' while I observed that people called me good, or clever, or sensible! As if any girl wanted to be called sensible! So I looked steadily at my image in the glass, and I faced the unpleasant fact.

" 'You are plain, Coralie,' I said to myself; 'unmistakably plain. You have tolerable eyes, and good teeth; but your nose is a failure, your complexion is pallid, and your mouth is just

twice too large for prettiness. Never forget that you are plain, my dear Coralie, and then perhaps other people won't remember the fact quite so often. Shake hands with Fate; accept your thick nose and your pallid complexion as the stern necessities of your existence, and make the most of your eyes and teeth, and your average head of hair.' That is the gist of what I said to myself, in less sophisticated language, perhaps, before I was fifteen, and from that line of conduct I have never departed. So if I have come to nineteen years of age without being admired, I have at least escaped being laughed at!"

"You are a bright, clever girl, Cora, and have quite enough good looks to float your cleverness, and to win you plenty of attention."

"Do you really mean that?" asked Miss Urquhart, turning a pair of keen brown eyes upon Lady Penrith. "Well, you who are among the handsomest of your sex can afford to be generous. The men are civil enough to

me, certainly; and I believe some of them like me, in a way, as a jolly good fellow, don't you know."

"I think you ought to leave off being a jolly good fellow, Cora, and remember that you are a young lady, now your twentieth birthday is drawing near," said her ladyship, with kindly seriousness.

"What, leave off cigarettes, and horsey epithets, forego my morning fun in the stables and kennels—give the billiard-room a holiday—and take to embroidering window curtains and reading the last book of the Honourable Somebody's travels in Timbuctoo. So I would, Auntie, if I could only make up my mind which line is likely to pay best in such a case as mine—the well brought up, stand-offish young lady, or the free and easy young person whom her male acquaintances talk of as 'good fun,' or 'not a bad sort.'"

"Perhaps you will explain what you mean by paying best?"

“ Oh, I’m sure you catch my meaning. Which line will bring me the most eligible offer of marriage? That is the question. Of course there is a sprinkling of proper-minded young men, the cream of the Peerage and the landed gentry, who could only be won by a proper-minded young woman; but I doubt if among these chosen ones there is a chance for such as I, and I have observed that the ruck of young men prefer the society of a girl who is distinctly on their own level, a little below them rather than a little above. That is why chorus girls and barmaids often get on so well in the world.”

“ Ah, Cora, what a pity you should have learnt so much about the seamy side of life.”

“ Yes, that comes of being brought up by a father instead of a mother. Had my mother lived she would have reared me in a state of guileless innocence. I should have thought burlesque boys and pantomime fairies a kind of semi-angelic creatures, and I should never have

heard of a barmaid ; whereas the governor used to entertain me with the gossip of the clubs every morning at breakfast, the only meal he took at home."

"My poor Coralie ! And your father—pray don't call him governor—taught you that your mission in life is to marry ?"

"Well, if I can ; badly, if I can't ; at any rate to get myself some kind of a husband, so as to take myself off the paternal hands. At least, that was his idea a year or two ago. Now that you are so good to me and let me be here and in Berkeley Square he is no longer so keen on my marrying. So long as I don't worry or burden him he is satisfied. But when you grow tired of me——"

"I am not going to tire of you, Cora, I mean to grow fonder of you, if you will let me."

"Let you ! Why, I worship you. You are my ideal of all that is perfect in woman. If the leopard could change his spots I would

prove my sincerity by trying to be like you—in grace and dignity and high and pure thoughts——”

Lady Penrith acknowledged these compliments with a sigh.

“Ah, I know you have only a poor opinion of yourself, you don’t half know how good you are.”

“Good! I am nothing, Cora; a passive nonentity; a piece of human furniture that fills an allotted space in Lord Penrith’s establishment, and which is of no importance in the world, either for good or evil.”

“That is hard, ain’t it,” sighed Coralie. “With your beauty you ought to have done as much harm as Cleopatra. You ought to have seen fleets destroyed and armies slaughtered for your beaux yeux, or kept two kingdoms in commotion, like Mary Stuart. Or even in these degenerate modern times you might have set the town in a blaze, been the cause of separations and divorces, Belgian duels, and Mayfair

suicides. With beauty, and such wealth as yours—to be only Lady Penrith. No, it is not much after all. And yet how many people envy you—I, myself, for instance.”

“I hope you are above so paltry a feeling, Cora.”

“Don’t hope anything good or noble of my father’s daughter,” said Coralie, renewing her attack upon a pile of crisp biscuits, and munching as she talked.

“I don’t like to hear a daughter speak of her father as you speak of yours, Cora,” Lady Penrith said gravely, “and I would much rather you left his name out of our conversation. You ought to remember that he and I have long ceased to be friends.”

“I ought! I ought!” cried Cora. “I am a wretch to forget,” and then she put down her biscuit and sighed remorsefully. “It was so good of you to rescue me from my shabby, lonely life; it was so good of you to forget that I am Hubert Urquhart’s daughter.”

“You are my husband’s niece. That gives you a claim upon me, Cora.”

“There are hundreds of women who would laugh such a claim to scorn; and you have plenty of girls of your own blood to care for; those nice Hammond girls, who are devoted to you.”

“They are very good girls, but they have a mother to look after them.”

“And I was motherless and alone, educated in a second-rate school, kept by a needy French woman in a shabby suburb beyond the Bois de Boulogne, and eating my heart out in a dingy lodging-house, which had but one virtue, that it was near my father’s favourite clubs. Oh, how I hated that dark, narrow street under the shadow of St. James’s Church, and the joy-bells and death-bells, and the clock that struck all the weary hours; and the smart weddings, which served only to remind me how little chance I had of ever being married in a respectable manner; and the landlady, who would

come in and squat down uninvited upon the wretched sofa—until I felt tempted to ask whether the law between landlord and tenant made it her sofa or ours—and who condoled with me because I must be so lonely with my books and piano. As if books and piano were not better than her cockney company. Oh, it was a bottomless pit of squalid misery from which you rescued me. I ought to be grateful.”

“Don’t talk about gratitude, Cora. Be happy. That is all I want of you.”

“I’ll do my best,” answered the girl briskly. “I don’t know whether it is the chef or Mrs. Ricketts who makes these too delicious biscuits, but whatsoever hand mixes the paste it is the hand of genius. And now I must go and give myself a warm bath, after all the mud and mire of the day’s diversion, and spend an hour or so in making myself just endurable.”

“Put on one of your prettiest frocks,” said Lady Penrith. “Mr. Coverdale is a good enough match for any young woman.”

“The Honourable and Reverend John Coverdale! It looks rather nice upon the address of a letter. But do you suppose for one moment, Aunt, that a serious and cultured Anglican parson would ever look with the eye of favour upon me?” asked Cora, pausing with her hand upon the door.

“Love delights in incongruities. Mr. Coverdale is highly intellectual, and I believe both kind and conscientious. He is just the husband to——”

“To reform me! Ah, Aunt, if it were any use trying for him.”

She opened the door quickly, and was gone. Lady Penrith heard her whistling a music-hall melody, learnt in the smoking-room, as she went along the corridor.

“That is the warmest affection I get in this house,” thought Sibyl Penrith, as the notes died away in the distance. “I wonder whether she is false or true. An Urquhart, and true! That would indeed be an anomaly. But then

there is the other side. Her mother may have been a good woman."

She wanted to think well of this motherless girl if she could, for pure pity, although the girl was the daughter of that man whom she regarded as her worst enemy, the man who had turned the sweetest gift of life to bitterness and despair. She believed the worst of Hubert Urquhart, her husband's half-brother; and yet, hearing from Lord Penrith that Hubert Urquhart's daughter was living alone and neglected in a West End bachelor lodging-house, all her kindly instincts rose in the girl's favour, and she lay awake a whole night thinking how she could serve this unhappy waif, whose misfortune it was to belong to such a father.

There was one thing Lady Penrith could not do. She could not cross the threshold of any house inhabited by Hubert Urquhart.

She spoke to her husband on the morning after that night of troubled thought.

“I have been thinking of what you told me yesterday about your brother’s girl,” she began. “I don’t like the idea of your niece being in such a miserable position, and if you don’t object I should like to take her to live with me. There is plenty of room for her, both here and in the country.”

“Yes, there is room enough, undoubtedly. We are not a large family,” said Penrith, who had fretted himself with an angry wonder at the absence of an heir.

Two children had been born to him, and had died in infancy. It seemed to him that there was a curse upon his union with a woman who had never flattered him so far as to pretend she loved him. She had given him herself and her wealth, the plaything of Fate, the slave of adverse circumstances; and it seemed to him, and perhaps to the wife also, that a blight had fallen upon their offspring, the withering blight of a home where love had never entered.

“ You have no objection, then ? ” asked Sibyl, after a pause.

They were in the hall, in the great stately house near Berkeley Square, one of those few houses in West End London, where rank may live within high garden walls, hidden from the outside world. The garden was gloomy, after the manner of London gardens, despite all that horticulture could do in the way of carpet beds and showy creepers. The house was grandly ugly without and splendidly luxurious within. The wife's wealth had been spent lavishly upon that long-neglected pile, and could the last Earl of Penrith have revisited his town mansion, his astonished ghost would hardly have recognised the rooms which, in his own day, had been conspicuous for the shabbiness of their curtains and carpets, and the ugliness of their furniture, of the later Georgian period. Under her present ladyship's regime the house had been furnished and decorated throughout after the fashion of

Louis Seize; and it might have been the mansion *entre cour et jardin* of a Legitimist nobleman in the Faubourg St. Germain. Space and light, grace of line, and delicacy of colouring distinguished those large and lofty reception-rooms, that airy hall, with its double sweep of shallow marble stairs, its groups of palms, and gracious marble forms of Fawn and Nymph, Cupid and Psyche.

Penrith paced up and down the hall with an inscrutable countenance. He was a man in whom speech seemed in some wise an effort.

“You won’t mind my having your niece as a kind of companion, will you, Penrith?” urged his wife.

“Mind? No, of course not. It is very good of you to suggest the thing. All I fear is that the girl may prove a bore to you.”

And so the matter was settled, and Coralie Urquhart was transferred with her meagre belongings from the shabby second-floor front in Jermyn Street to Penrith House, where there

was room and verge enough to allow this young lady her own sitting-room, as well as a spacious bed and dressing-room. She declared that she felt like a princess amidst her new surroundings, and so much the more so after Madame Lolotte, her ladyship's dressmaker, had taken her measure for a complete set of frocks and outdoor garments to suit all the requirements of her new life.

Sibyl was far too delicate to suggest any overhauling of the girl's existing wardrobe, but a few judicious questions elicited the fact that Miss Urquhart possessed exactly five frocks, three tailor-made and threadbare, while the remaining two were evening gowns, a year and a half old, and too small to be worn without torture.

"The Pater's tailor gave me a start with those nice little tweed frocks, when I came from Paris, but he has turned disagreeable since then, and won't give any more tick."

Coralie was mildly reproved for that last

word, and Madame Lolotte was sent for and told that she must produce a season's dresses for Miss Urquhart before the end of the week. She shrugged her shoulders and elevated her eyebrows, and then exhibited all her neat little teeth in a caressing smile.

“*Pour Miladi on fait l'impossible,*” she said.
“*Mâis, mon Dieu, quatre jours pour faire faire un trousseau !*”

In the result the impossible was done, so far as the production of two delicious little walking-gowns and three party-frocks, of a most exquisite simplicity, yet with a certain boldness of style and colouring which set off Miss Urquhart's plainness.

“*Elle est franchement laide, la p'tite,*” the dressmaker told Lady Penrith's maid at a later interview. “But it is an original style of ugliness, and I like it better than your milky-skinned English faces, with their insignificant features.”

Henceforward, Coralie's life was a bed of roses

—or would have been had she been without conscience and without heart. Unluckily for her, she had not yet attained that hardness which rises superior to all moral feelings, all vain compunctions; but she was her father's daughter, and she was in a fair way of becoming like him.

He had a serious conversation with her the night before she left him to become a member of his brother's family.

“Cora,” he said, thoughtfully, lying back in the one comfortable armchair which his landlady provided for her victims, and smoking his favourite briarwood, “you and I are not likely to see much of each other while you are under Lady Penrith's protection.”

“Why not?” she asked, wonderingly.

“Because her ladyship hates me like poison. Never mind why she hates me. It is an old story, and a long one. I don't reciprocate the feeling, and I am profoundly interested in the lady and all that concerns her. By the way,

you keep a diary, of course? Most girls do."

"Do they? Then they must have more to write about than I have had since I left Madame Michon's. What should I put down? 'Tuesday: Poured out father's coffee. Went for a walk in the Green Park with the landlady's daughter. Began another novel, rather stupider than the last. Why does Mudie send one the books one doesn't ask for, instead of the book one has been wanting for the last three weeks? Went to bed at half-past eleven. Father had not come home.' Do you think that sort of record would be worth keeping?"

"Happy the woman who has no history," answered her father sententiously. "Well, you will keep a diary in future, if you please, Cora; and you will keep it in such a manner as will admit of your allowing me to read it. You will have plenty to record at Penrith House and Killander Castle. You will have her ladyship—a most interesting study, a poem and a

history incarnate. I want you to observe her closely, and to write down everything that concerns her—her actions, sentiments, opinions, the people with whom she associates, and the esteem in which she holds them.”

“Father,” said Cora, looking at him with wide-open eyes and hardening lips, more earnestly than she had ever looked at him in her life before, “you want me to be a spy !”

“No, my dear ; I only want you to be an observer. My interest in Lady Penrith is founded on the purest motives. I want to put an end to the feud between us, which is perilous for her and unpleasant for me. I know her miserably mated to my brother, who is—well, about as bad as they make ‘em,” continued Urquhart, taking refuge in slang. “I have no doubt I can be of use to her in the future—financially, in the protection of her enormous fortune, and otherwise—and I can only serve her by watchfulness, personal or vicarious. It is just possible that this kindness to you means

a change of feeling towards me—a holding out of the olive-branch. So much the better if it does ; but in any case you must watch for me, since I can't watch for myself. You will find out her friends and her enemies, and on which side the peril lies——”

“ Will you assure me that you are her friend, and that no harm to her can come of anything I may tell you ? ”

“ I do assure you that I am her friend. I will go further, and tell you that ten years ago I was her devoted lover. She refused me—her heart was buried in another man's grave—and a few months afterwards she married my elder brother. The match was of old Sir Joseph Higginson's making, I have no doubt. She accepted a coronet—with a wry face, perhaps, but accepted it, all the same, as women do. That old romantic feeling of mine died out of me long ago ; but Sibyl Penrith is still a great deal nearer and dearer to me than any other woman, and I should like to help her if ever she

have need of help. She is too rich not to be robbed ; she is too handsome not to be tempted. You will be with her in a confidential capacity ; you are keen enough to scent either danger, and to pass the warning on to me. You can send me your diary weekly."

"I can't understand how you can be of any use to her."

"I don't ask you to understand," replied Mr. Urquhart, with admirable nonchalance, puffing quietly at his briarwood.

CHAPTER II.'

CORA'S DIARY.

I HARDLY know how I should dispose of my evening hours at Killander Castle, if father had not imposed this task of diary-keeping upon me. My aunt leaves the drawing-room as the clock strikes ten. I don't believe she goes to bed before midnight, but as she has never invited me to a "causerie" in her room, and as she always wishes me a distinct good night in the gallery, where we light our candles, I feel that solitude is my portion, and that I am left to my own resources till the next morning.

I have always been a wretched sleeper; and one of my worst miseries at Mme. Michon's was to hear the church clock chime the quarters

all through the long dreary night, perhaps until five o'clock in the morning, when I dropped into the slumber of sheer exhaustion, and dreamt dreams that were darkened with the consciousness that the dressing bell would ring at six, and that I must be dressed and in the class-room at a quarter to seven. Oh, weary servitude! oh, joyless days and restless nights! When I find the wheels of life dragging rather wearily at Killander Castle, let me remember the dreary round of school work, the scanty fare of the school table, the burden of too frequent church services, and the ever-present consciousness that I was the worst-dressed girl in the school, and that my bills were always in arrear. I must, however, admit that Mme. Michon treated me fairly and kindly, after her lights, considering that she stood in danger of losing by me. It was Mme. Michon's pupils, on whom my poverty inflicted no inconvenience, who made me feel the agony of being poor. If I had not been the niece of an Earl, I think they

would have trampled upon me. My blue blood went for something, and I took an aggressive attitude against every girl who represented the wealth made in commerce. Well, that is "an auld sang," thank Heaven, and Lady Penrith; and I am here in this Cumbrian Castle, lapped in luxury, with fine raiment in my wardrobe, and plenty of pocket-money; and if the life is rather dull now and then, I am not the less grateful to Providence and my uncle's wife. As for my uncle himself, of whose race I am, and on whom alone I have any claim, he throws me a word now and then as he might throw a biscuit to one of his spaniels, and cares less, I fancy, what may become of me than what may become of the dog. He is a curious man—handsome, in a certain worn-out faded style, like a portrait by an old master that has been spoilt in the cleaning. He is straight as a dart, tall, well set up. He is said to have the grand manner, which I take to be a manner of caring for nobody in the world but one's self.

At ten o'clock my aunt bids me good night in the long gallery leading to her own rooms, and I cross the head of the great staircase, and retire to my own den, to yawn over a novel or to write my diary, till midnight.

Inclination would take me to the smoke-room, where I believe I should be not altogether unwelcome ; for the men must have exhausted their stock of improper anecdotes by ten o'clock, and must have begun to grow tired of their own society. They have told me severally, and on different occasions, that I am good fun. How much I should prefer being "good fun" downstairs in that spacious, comfortable billiard-room, to moping up here over a dull novel, or my still duller diary !

The proprieties forbid me masculine society after ten o'clock ; so to thee, O Diary, I turn, and try to interest myself in a study of character. Lady Penrith's character in particular.

There is a certain fascination, I find, even in

the dullest diary, when it is about one's self—one's own feelings, likes and dislikes, odd fancies, rebellious promptings against Fate and Mrs. Grundy; but it is not so interesting when one writes about other people. My father honoured me by expressing a desire to read my jottings about her ladyship; I have therefore commenced a system of diary-keeping by double entry. What I mean him to read I write in one volume; my own little reveries I keep to myself in another volume. I suppose he really was in love with Lady Penrith, years ago, when I was a child, moping my little life away in the depths of Yorkshire, with my unpatrician maiden aunts. Yes, I suppose he was really and honestly in love with her, and not attached to her only on account of her wealth; and yet I can hardly imagine my father a romantic lover, caring for anything above and beyond his own interest. There is a hardness about him, just as there is about his lordship, and which I should call the Urquhart hardness, for I can see the same

character indicated in many of the family portraits on these walls—a cold, calm concentration of purpose which I take to mean absolute selfishness. Yet it may be that even a man of that hard nature might be moved to forget himself by such a woman as Sibyl Penrith in the flush of her girlish beauty. She is absolutely beautiful now at nine and twenty. She took me to three very big parties before we left London, and she was the handsomest woman amidst a crowd where I felt that to be plain was to be the exception to the rule of English beauty. Yes, any man might have loved and suffered for such a woman; only I think Sir Joseph Higginson's coal-pits would have more attraction for my father than the loveliest face that ever shone upon mankind. In any case I can understand what a bitter blow it must have been to him when she married his elder brother.

I wonder who the man was who died—the man she loved—the man in whose grave her heart is buried. Who was he, and where is

that grave where her heart lies dead and cold? Yes, I believe her heart is with the dead. She goes through life like an animated statue, coldly beautiful, benevolent, charitable, religious, polite and amiable to a most unsympathetic husband, fulfilling all the duties of that station to which it has pleased God to call her, and, if I read her right, caring for nothing in the world except her books and piano.

So much for my private opinions and speculations in volume two; and now for my observations upon life in general and Lady Penrith in particular in volume one, which, if my father insist, I shall allow him to peruse.

We have been at Killander Castle for more than two months, and there has not been an event worth recording, or, indeed, any circumstance that can be honoured with the name of an event, till this afternoon. The life here since the beginning of August has been as luxuriously monotonous as life on Tennyson's

Lotos Island, only we have not enjoyed such a climate as tempted Ulysses and his companions to a perpetual repose. The weather has been—distinctly British.

His lordship spent the latter half of August and a great part of September in Scotland—shooting. He arrived here towards the end of last month, bringing a few friends with him, for more shooting. My aunt declined Scotland for this autumn. She wanted nothing but rest, after a busy season. Killander is her most established home. Here she has her largest collection of books and music, her favourite Broadwood, her finest garden and hothouses; here, in short, she has all the things in which a great lady with an empty heart can take delight. Here, too, she is within a drive or even a long walk of the house in which she was born, and the village where she knows every cottage and most of the inhabitants, from the bent old grandfather to the year-old baby. I have done a good deal of cottage-visiting with

her since we came here; and I must confess that I find cottagers, with their everlasting woes and incurable ailments, utterly insupportable, and I am puzzled to understand the order of intellect which can take pleasure in personal contact with them.

To relieve their wants is a duty and an inclination which I can understand in a person as rich as Lady Penrith, who can never feel any the poorer for her beneficence; but surely there are clergymen's wives, and sisterhoods, and people that one could employ for all this dismal, uninteresting work, instead of bothering about every detail of every old woman's miserable existence, as my aunt does. However, all this twaddle seems to interest her, and I have to sit or stand by while she listens to long rigmaroles about rheumatics, or sick children, or drinking husbands, or sons out of work, or daughters that have gone wrong. It is one treadmill-round of human misery, to be mitigated by beneficences of such miserable amount

—taken in relation to her ladyship's wealth—that they really might just as well be distributed by a bailiff, or homely drudge of a curate's wife. Why Lady Penrith should amuse herself by sympathising—or pretending to sympathise, for it can't be real—with all those squalid miseries I can no more understand than I can fathom the minds of those women who get up at half-past six every morning to attend matins, when they might enjoy the best hour of the day, the hour between waking and getting up, with a cup of strong tea and a volume of Guy de Maupassant's stories.

I have never allowed my ennui or my sentiments to escape during the frequent martyrdom of this cottage-visiting. Far from it. I shake the dirtiest paws, sip the vilest tea, and win all hearts in my jolly-good-fellow manner, which has given the cottagers the idea that however sternly Conservative "The Castle" may be, Miss Urquhart is at heart a Radical.

Sometimes I have been tempted into wonder-

ing whether all this active benevolence, this sympathy with the sick and sorrowing poor, may not be a self-imposed penance on the part of Lady Penrith; the expiation of her maturer years for some sin of her girlhood. Yet, I cannot think that this passionless nature ever deviated from the straight path. Her character must have always been spotless; superior to every temptation. And, again, for a woman born rich there are so few temptations. Satan must offer so choice a bait when he fishes for the rich man's soul.

What other idiosyncrasies besides this regard for the poor have I observed in my aunt's character? First, her love of music, which amounts to a passion; secondly, her love of books, which astonishes me, books not being at all in my way. I never read a book when I can get hold of a newspaper; and I infinitely prefer *Truth* and the *World* to any of the authors who are called classics. Nor do I see that book-learning is of the slightest use to any

young woman who does not want to write school-books or go out as a governess. The little I have seen of masculine society has shown me that men detest "culture" in a woman. The men who go in for learning themselves hate a rival in their own field. Scholars don't want sympathy from women. They want blind admiration. And the average man—a monster of ignorance about everything that is not in the newspapers—shrinks from a well-informed woman as from a drawing-room pestilence. To please the sterner sex a woman should know just enough of politics to be able to listen intelligently to the old fogies and middle-aged bores, and enough about sport and society scandals to be able to carry on a touch-and-go conversation with a young man of average intellect. She may say a smart thing now and again, but she must never pretend to be a wit. She must accept her position as man's inferior, and honour and revere her sultan.

If my father favours me by reading the last remarks he will perceive that I have taken his lessons in worldly wisdom to heart, and that I am studying how to please a potential husband. There is one here, Mr. Coverdale, Lord Workington's only son, who would be well worth pleasing—but, alas, alas, penniless and plain must shoot at lesser game.

To return to Lady Penrith. She is a reading woman, and her spacious morning-room is lined with books, all of her own collection, and entirely distinct from the orthodox library of standard authors on the ground floor. I amused myself a few days ago, while I was waiting to go out driving with her, by a careful study of these books. I have been told to study the lady's character, and some part of her character must reveal itself in the books she chooses.

I found poetry strongly represented by poets old and new. Byron, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and Tennyson are lavishly spread along the shelves, in various editions, with a richness of

binding and variety of style that mark the lady's appreciation. Milton and Shakespeare are equally honoured. The poets fill a large section of the bookcases near the fireplace; and on this side of the room my aunt has her favourite armchair, tea-table, and cosy nook. If anything could make me fond of reading, it would be such a room as this. The novelists are here also,—Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Lytton, and Eliot, and here and there a volume by a lesser light. Then come biography, history, criticism, metaphysics. My aunt seems to have taken all learning for her province, as somebody says of himself. One block of books especially interested me—for they suggested a warm interest in a subject which I should consider very remote from Lady Penrith's line of thought. On the shelves below the poets, and within reach of her hand as she sits in her favourite chair, I found a collection of books upon African travel and African sport, from Livingstone downwards. I never saw so

many books upon one subject in any library I ever looked at.

I ask myself, with natural wonder, how and why a woman who is utterly indifferent to sport in England and Scotland should be keenly interested in sport in Africa; why a woman who has travelled very little in Europe should be interested in books of travel in that uncivilised quarter of the globe. The only answer to the riddle which offers itself to my mind is that the lady's interest in Africa is vicarious, and that the man to whom she gave her heart in youth was in some manner associated with the dark continent. I have found her poring over Burton or Cameron, Stanley or Baker, in the lazy hour between afternoon tea and the dressing bell. I once ventured to ask her how she could find enjoyment in books which to me appeared essentially dull and dry, and she looked up with her sweet smile, and answered—

“There is not a single page in these books without interest for me, Cora.”

“ And would you like to travel in Africa ? ”

“ Dearly.”

“ Why don't you, then ? ”

She gave a faint sigh before she answered.

“ Hardly any woman could run the risks and endure the hardships to which these men exposed themselves; and if any woman could, the world would not let her do it. My duties are at home.”

“ Were I you, I would hold every duty subordinate to my own whim,” said I. “ If I wanted to roam about African deserts, and ride across African swamps, and see the Falls of the Zambesi or the Mountains of the Moon, nothing should prevent me. I would defy opinion, as Lady Hester Stanhope did.”

I like to tease her about her wealth and its omnipotence sometimes. I think it is the sting of conscious poverty which goads me to remind her what a power she possesses, and how poor a use she makes of it.

How deeply sad her face was while she spoke

of Africa! Yes, that is the charm. Her lover must have been a wanderer in those wild pathways. The next time I found myself alone in her morning-room I made a further examination of her African collection. I looked for any volumes by less familiar names, thinking that among these I might find some book written by the man she loved. Very few men travel much in strange lands without delivering themselves of a book. Sooner or later the thirst for paper and print takes possession of them. They hunt up their old journals and random records of sport, and eke out their own scanty materials with plagiarism from Burton or Stanley.

I found one volume—a thinnish octavo—which attracted me for two reasons. Firstly, it was more delicately bound than any of the other books. Secondly, it showed signs of having been more read.

The title was unpretentious—"My African Apprenticeship." The name of the author was

Brandon Mountford; the year of publication 1874—just twelve years ago.

On the fly-leaf I found a brief inscription—
“From B. M. to S. H. May 6, 1876.”

B. M., of course, stands for the author; S. H., for Sibyl Higginson. It was not till the following year that Sir Joseph Higginson's daughter became Lady Penrith. Dear little book, to give me such precise information about yourself. “B. M. to S. H.” Only a lover would write thus. Anyone upon ceremonious terms would have written, “From the author.”

I looked into the pages. The usual thing! Descriptions of scenery, descriptions of storms, sunsets, sunrises, aurora borealis, wonderful effects of sky. Perils of being eaten by savages or wild beasts. Perils of having nothing to eat. Lion-shooting, fever, friendly natives. Nothing of personal history to tell me what manner of man Brandon Mountford was. But that vellum-bound book, with its delicately tooled edges and gold lettering, and with leaves that opened so

easily, with here and there a rose-petal or a withered violet, told me one fact for certain. Whatever "B. M." may have been—saint or sinner—Sibyl Higginson loved him, and Sibyl Penrith cherishes his memory.

Oh, irony of Fate, that one woman should own over a million, and sit in her lonely room brooding over a dead man's book, while thousands of women in the world should be striving and wrestling to get themselves decently married for the sake of food and raiment, a shelter, and a fireside! Had I a tenth part of Lady Penrith's money, what a variety of pleasures, excitements, and enjoyments I would wring out of this too brief existence of ours!

I peeped into the billiard-room after lunch to-day, and saw Mr. Coverdale knocking about the balls by himself in a low-spirited way, so I lingered in the room for a few minutes, looking for last week's *Punch*, and presently he invited me to play a fifty with him. He is a poor player, and I am a poor player, though I

have done my possible to make up for the deficiencies of my education by playing whenever anybody condescends to ask me, and by practising whenever I can get the table to myself. The fifty took a longish time, for besides our slow scoring, the honourable and reverend John was in an expansive humour, and talked a good deal of his views, which are ritualistic to a degree that verges upon Romanism. I humoured him to the utmost—indeed, in religious matters I am ritualistic if I am anything—and we had a really interesting conversation, in which I seemed to get more in sympathy with this cold pattern of propriety than I have ever been before. Indeed, as we put our cues into the rack he made me a little reproachful speech which was to my mind a compliment.

“You are like St. Paul at least in one attribute, Miss Urquhart,” he said. “You can be all things to all men. No one who heard you talking slang with the shooters yesterday

would anticipate your delightful conversation to-day."

Now observe, O author of my being, that your daughter's delightful conversation had chiefly consisted in holding her tongue. I had let him talk, and only said just so much as was necessary to lead him on to descant at large upon the theme he loves. Intelligent listening means sympathy, comprehension, everything to a talking man.

The clock struck three. My aunt generally drives out at three o'clock, and as a rule I go with her. It is one of my duties, or privileges, whichever I like to call it. I rushed up to my room, put on jacket and hat, snatched a pair of gloves, and flew downstairs to the hall and out to the great flight of steps which approaches this stately castle.

The barouche was at the door, and my aunt was already seated in it. At sight of my flying figure on the steps, the footman descended from his perch, and opened the carriage door. In

another minute I was seated at her ladyship's side.

"I did not know you were coming with me, Cora," she said, and I detected a shade of annoyance in her tone.

Offended at my unpunctuality, no doubt, thought I; but it struck me afterwards that upon this particular afternoon she wanted to be alone.

I apologised for my late appearance, and she affected an interest in my account of Mr. Coverdale's conversation: but I could see that her mind was elsewhere, and that she spoke at random.

We drove to Cargill, a village on the seaward side of the great dreary moor which separates Killander Castle from all the civilised world northward of its walls. Her ladyship stopped the carriage at the first house in the village.

"I am going to some of the cottages, Cora," she said, "but I shan't stay long in any of them. Would you like to sit in the carriage till

I have done? There is the *Nineteenth Century* to amuse you."

She pointed to a half-cut magazine on the empty seat. I hate these learned periodicals which presuppose a corresponding erudition on the part of the reader: and the notion that Lady Penrith did not want my company gave a stimulus to my curiosity. I jumped out of the carriage with alacrity.

"I had much rather see your cottagers than read the *Nineteenth Century*," said I.

We went into several cottages, with the usual result. Ailments, rheumatic, and internal, sore legs, swollen faces, all the disagreeables of life—sons out of work, husbands given to drink—the old, old story. My aunt was sympathetic, took note of all necessities, and promised relief. In all this I could see nothing out of the beaten track; but I observed that in every cottage she asked the same questions about a man she had seen upon the moor on the previous afternoon, a man who looked like

a shepherd, very ragged and poor, and, as she thought, not altogether right in his mind. No one was able to identify the person she described, though many suggestions, more or less wide of the mark, were offered. She exhibited wonderful pertinacity in this inquiry, and we went from hovel to hovel till I was heartily sick of the subject. What did I care for a ragged man who was or was not of weak intellect?

"I should like to help this poor creature," said my aunt; and she charged every one of whom she inquired to make it his or her business to find the ragged personage, in order that he might be clothed, and put in the way of being restored to his right mind.

"Is there any asylum for lunatics in the neighbourhood from which the man could have escaped?" she asked of an elderly woman, who had given more signs of intelligence than the other aborigines she had questioned.

“None nearer than Durrock, and that’s a good forty mile from here.”

The search was evidently hopeless, and my aunt’s benevolent intentions were to bear no fruit. The afternoon was cold and windy, with that parching east wind which is harmful alike to complexion and temper. I felt that my nose was blue, and I knew that I was in a very acrimonious state of mind.

The change from stuffy cottages to the bleak outer air was too trying to have been patiently endured by a saint; yet Lady Penrith seemed alike unconscious of the nipping cold outside and of the frowsy warmth within.

Not contented with this wearisome house to house inquiry, she drove a long round on our way home in order to repeat her questions at half a dozen isolated cottages; and it was nearly dark before the great grey bulk of the Penriths’ stronghold appeared across the grey distance. I never look at that mediæval castle without a faint pang of envy, which

no amount of recently acquired wealth, much as I adore money, could inspire. That legacy of past ages stirs the small modicum of romance in my nature. I envy Lady Penrith the possession of that fine old fortress; and I am proud to think I am one of the race whose forbears held it in the days when every great nobleman was a warrior chieftain; proud to think that I am descended from ancestors who fought for king and country, when England was young and bold and warlike, rather than from some plodding lawyer who won his peerage in the dust and din of the law courts and by subserviency to the powers that be.

So you see, father, you who are of the world worldly, there is a thin thread of romance still running through the warp and weft of your daughter's character. All your lessons in the craft that rules mankind have not extinguished my reverence for the past, and my belief in the value of ancient lineage—a value in one's own secret estimate of oneself, the feeling that,

come what may, one is better than the ruck of mankind, better inherently, by a superiority which dates from the Crusades, and which no achievement of newly made wealth can cancel.

I contrived to suppress all demonstrations of vexation during that long, cold drive, with its circuitous extensions, but I could not quite restrain my natural curiosity.

"You must have some special reason for being interested in this ragged man, I should think, aunt, by your earnestness in searching for him," I said, when we had turned our backs upon a wretched stone hovel, half hidden in a dip of the moor.

"You are right, Cora; I have a reason," she answered quietly, and in a tone that forbade further questioning.

I hugged myself in my sealskin jacket and muff—her gifts—and told myself that I must wait for time and chance to show me the nature of her reason. It must be a very strong one—if I have any power to read her

face—almost as strong as the reason for her interest in books of African travel.

All the resources of my intelligence are henceforth pledged to the solution of this social mystery. I have very little to think about, now that the all-absorbing question of ways and means has been made easy for me; and for want of interest in my own insignificant existence I am naturally thrown upon speculations about my aunt.

If John Coverdale would only condescend to fall in love with me life would take different colours—would change from dull, uniform grey to the brilliant variety of the rainbow. Not that I am in love with that handsome pattern of propriety, mark you; but every girl wants a lover. The conquest of man is woman's mission—the only mission worth a woman's thought; and not to be admired and loved is to be outside the pale.

I am plain, let me not forget that—plain, but not repulsive. I have good eyes and teeth, and

you have told me that my face lights up when I talk, that my complexion improves by candle-light, and that I have a quality which you call "chien," and which is not without its charm for the opposite sex, especially the duller members of that sex, who are apt to be caught by smartness and gumption in a woman. This much of praise have you given me, O my father, in the course of our conversations across the morning coffee and rasher.

Am I smart, have I gumption, I wonder? I recall the stories I have heard of plain women and their conquests; and it sometimes appears to me that the unbeautiful have been very often winners in the race. One hears of men who forsake lovely wives to go to perdition for plain and even elderly mistresses. One hears of men who line their bachelor rooms with pictures of beautiful women—who go about declaring that only perfect loveliness can charm them—and who unite themselves in lifelong union with sallow complexions and snub noses.

I will remember all these anomalies when I am inclined to despair of my own fortunes. And in the meantime I will devote my leisure to the study of my aunt's character.

She has been very good to me, and I ought to love her dearly. There are times when I tell myself that I do so love her; and then, perhaps, a cold wave of doubt comes over me. She is so handsome, so calm and self-possessed; she has been so favoured by Fortune and Nature in all those respects where I have been hardly used. Is it human in me to love her? More especially when I much doubt if she has any affection for me? She is a woman whose life is ruled by fixed principles and ideas. I believe she endures me and protects me, just as she goes to church on bleak, uncomfortable mornings, because the thing is a duty and has to be done.

CHAPTER III.

A MARIAGE DE CONVENANCE.

Two and thirty years before that bleak October afternoon on which Coralie Urquhart descanted in her journal, Sir Joseph Higginson, of Arlington Street and Ellerslie Park, etc., startled his friends and neighbours by an aristocratic alliance, and the bringing home of a lovely girl-wife to reign over his spacious house near Ardliston. Sir Joseph was forty-nine years of age at the time of his marriage, plain of face and clumsy of figure; but he was one of the wealthiest pit-owners in the North of England, and, if his immediate surroundings were surprised at this union, society in London regarded the marriage as the most natural thing in life.

Here was the Earl of Allandale, on the one part, with a large family, the offspring of two poorly dowered wives ; and here was a millionaire of mature years, against whose position nothing could be said except that he had made it for himself, and against whose moral character no slander had ever reached the ear of the great world. Decidedly, pronounced society, Lord Allandale had done wisely in uniting his youngest daughter—youngest of a family of eleven—to Sir Joseph Higginson.

The young lady herself was never heard to complain. Whatever dream she had cherished of a different union was a dream that had found its own tearful ending before she saw the lord of those Cumbrian pits. She was told that her acceptance of Sir Joseph would be advantageous to all her family, as well as an assurance of high fortune to herself. He could help her brothers, some of whom were public officials, while the more enterprising of the band dabbled in trade and exhibited their patrician name

upon the prospectuses of newly launched companies. She, as his wife, could be useful to her sisters, since his spacious mansion in Arlington Street would offer a better stage for matrimonial efforts than the somewhat shabby old house in Mayfair, which the Mountfords maintained with a struggle, and whose chief merit was to be found in certain unsavoury traditions of old-world scandals, duels, elopements, family quarrels, forced marriages, which clung to the panelled walls of those low-ceiled rooms in which Lord Allandale's ancestors had lived, and loved, and hated, and suffered for more than two centuries. Lord Allandale professed an affectionate pride in the house because his family had held it so long; but he was fain to confess that it was inconvenient and insanitary, and that it cost him a "plaguy lot of money" to keep the roof from tumbling in and the windows from falling out.

"If I were to sell the old gazabo to a pork-butcher from Chicago he would pull it down and

build a little palace on the site, or scoop out the inside and restore it in the style of the seventeenth century," said his lordship; "but I shan't part with it while I have a shot in the locker, and we must pig in it as best we can."

Pigging was not an elegant expression, but it seemed hardly inappropriate, for the upper floors were divided into bedchambers not much larger than a modern pigsty, and of inconvenient shapes for the most part, in which the Ladies Mountford and their honourable brothers were almost as crowded as an Irish peasant's household amid the fertile fields of Kerry. For compensation they had Basingstoke House, a great barrack in Hampshire, on a windy hill westward of Basingstoke, where there were small inconvenient bedrooms enough for the whole tribe.

Lady Lucy Mountford submitted to fate, in the person of Sir Joseph Higginson, and became at once mistress of the house in Arlington Street, palatial, splendid, rich in all things that make

the outward grace and glory of life, and of Ellerslie Park, in Cumberland, a vast stone mansion, essentially modern and essentially Tudor, designed by the most fashionable architect of the first ten years of Sir Joseph's prosperity. It had been discovered, or at any rate alleged, later that the fashionable architect was a fraud, that his Tudor houses were none of them genuinely Tudor, but only Tudoresque, and that he had stolen his flashiest ideas from the sober Flemings, of Antwerp and Ghent. Notwithstanding which condemnation from the ever-advancing critic, who is always getting beyond the perfection of yesterday, Ellerslie was a remarkable house in a very fine situation, with turrets and broad embayed windows that looked wide over land and sea.

Sir Joseph owned most of the land to be seen from those windows, and he owned a whole district of collieries and colliers' cottages, which were happily unseen by the inmates of Ellerslie, and which lay in the furthestmost dip of the

long, low hill. He was the wealthiest man and the largest landowner in that part of the county, and he was not without his enemies—no prosperous man ever escapes the hatred of the unsuccessful. “It is the bright day that brings forth the adder.” Sir Joseph was as popular as most county magistrates and employers of labour; but it was said of him that he was a hard man, and that he never accepted less than twelve pence for his shilling. He had begun life as a toiler in those pits of which he was now owner. It was said of him that everything he touched turned to gold; that he had Satan’s luck as well as his own; but this is an assertion commonly made about every man who from small beginnings attains to gigantic wealth. The world sees only the speculator’s success, but does not see, or at least readily forgets, the failures and disappointments that made the game of speculation difficult. It keeps no count of the hours of heart-sinking when the fortune already won trembled in the balance, and when

it was only by hazarding all that the game could be saved. Joseph Higginson was talked of as a modern Midas; and very few people knew or remembered how many an arduous stage there had been on that long uphill road to the pinnacle of success. He knew and remembered that he had been more than once on the verge of bankruptcy, and that he had more than once risked the game of life upon a single throw. He had shown himself a man of infinite resources, keen observation, and he was said to have had the gift of prophecy in a degree granted to but few financiers.

He had reached the age of forty-nine, ostensibly a bachelor, and had gratified his nephews and nieces, most of whom he had helped to rise considerably from their original status, by the assertion, often repeated, that he never would marry, when a chance meeting in the board-room of an insurance company, where he was chairman, brought about an acquaintance with Lord Allandale, who was one of the directors.

Your impecunious nobleman is apt to incline towards the low-born millionaire, and Allandale flattered Sir Joseph by telling him how much he had heard about his work in the North, and how interested he was in seeing the man who had done such good work. An invitation to a little dinner at the small house in Hertford Street followed a few days later. It was a man's dinner, and Sir Joseph hardly hoped to see the ladies of the family; but four out of the party of six left soon after ten o'clock—three to go to the House, where there was an important division coming on, and the fourth to look in at three or four smart dances—whereupon Lord Allandale proposed an adjournment to the drawing-room.

“I don't know whether you know my wife,” he said. “She goes out a good deal oftener than I do?”

“I have met her ladyship at parties, but I have never had the honour of an introduction,” answered Sir Joseph, meekly.

"Come up and be introduced now," said the Earl, cheerily.

Sir Joseph laid down his half-smoked cigar in the old Derby dessert-plate. He had observed that in noble families, however impecunious, one always found old china and Queen Anne silver, to excite the envy of the newly rich. He laid down his cigar, and pulled himself together, smoothing down the wrinkles in his white waistcoat.

He was a stout man, short-necked, broad-shouldered, and always wore a white waistcoat, whether the thing were in or out of fashion, excellent or intolerable. He followed his host up the narrow Mayfair staircase, which was decorated with those shabby old pictures and engravings of country houses which indicate family possessions and a long history. How different, he thought, to his staircase in Arlington Street, where all was newly splendid, created as it were by one sweep of the upholsterer's hand, all at a blow ! Here, portraits,

miniatures, battle-pieces in which Mountfords had figured, country houses, were stuck about anyhow upon casual nails.

The drawing-room, low and roomy, occupying the whole of the first floor, seemed full of women, and yet there was no one but Lady Allandale and her daughters, a flock of young women in gauzy white gowns, with a general impression of white azalias and ostrich feathers, standing about before the looking-glasses, pluming themselves ready for conquest, while they waited for the big family carriage that was to take them to a ball. They reminded Sir Joseph of a group of beautiful swans, pruning their plumage on the bosom of a summer lake. He was lost in admiration of the general effect, rather than of individual beauty; he could scarcely command his attention while he was being introduced to a large lady in peach-coloured brocade and diamonds, who was putting on a glove which seemed decidedly too small for the fat and jewelled hand it was required to cover. The

hand came out of the glove, and offered itself in the friendliest way to Sir Joseph.

“I think Sir Joseph and I knew each other very well before to-night, though we had not been introduced,” said Lady Allandale. “You were sitting next me at luncheon the day they launched the *Harmonia*, I remember. And we were near neighbours at Lady Downton’s big dinner-party the other day.”

Sir Joseph assented smilingly. He adored a peeress, wherever he met one.

“I had the honour of taking in Lady——”

“What, Amanda? She is always charming. Let me introduce you to my daughters, Sir Joseph. Lady Selina, Lady Laura, Lady Jane, Lady Rosina.”

The four white swans smilingly accepted the introduction, with gracious bendings of slender throats. The room was too dimly lighted to allow Sir Joseph to note the difference in their ages. The Mountfords were a race renowned for beauty, and to the millionaire’s eye the four

sisters looked equally beautiful. And then he suddenly perceived a girl sitting at the piano, in a pale blue cashmere frock—pale blue was a favourite colour thirty years ago—a girl with her hair caught back from her fair sweet face in a careless bunch of long loose curls, tied with a bit of blue ribbon; a girl in whose young face and candid eyes, looking up at him across the low cottage piano, he saw a loveliness infinitely beyond the grandiose beauty of the four swans.

“That is my youngest daughter, Sir Joseph,” said Lady Allandale, following his eyes. “She has not yet left the schoolroom.”

Lady Lucy rose shyly, embarrassed by the gaze of Sir Joseph’s great brown eyes, eyes that reminded her of a friendly ox in Basingstoke Park. She and Sir Joseph stood looking at each other for a few moments, equally embarrassed, almost as if some instinct of mind or heart foreshadowed the union of their lives.

She gave him her hand, tremulously, under the spell of his earnest gaze, or the presage of

her fate. The youngest daughter of five is doomed to flower late, and Lady Lucy, despite her cashmere frock and schoolroom status, was nineteen; and had her own little history, not altogether of the schoolroom; a history which gave a touch of pathos to the lily-face.

“A lovely young creature, but I’m afraid she’s rather sickly,” was Sir Joseph’s summing up of the situation.

He was only allowed ten minutes in this elysium of fashionable houris. Her ladyship’s carriage was announced, and the white daughters crowded down the staircase, followed by the ampler mother, on whose footsteps Sir Joseph and Lord Allandale attended.

Sir Joseph paused on the landing, while her ladyship’s bulky form was slowly descending, and addressed himself in parting speech to the damsel from the schoolroom—

“I’m afraid you must feel very envious of your sisters at such a moment as this, Lady Lucy,” he said.

“I don’t see why all girls should be supposed to be fond of dancing,” she answered rather pettishly. “I don’t care about it.”

“And you are not longing for next season, when you will be presented, I suppose?”

“No.”

“Lucy has seen too much of it all, from the outside,” said Lord Allandale, patting the graceful shoulder in the blue frock. “She is disillusionised before her time. Come, Sir Joseph, if you really mean to vote with your party to-night, you’d better be off. Your carriage has been at the door for the last half-hour.”

This was the beginning of Sir Joseph’s acquaintance with Lady Lucy Mountford. They were married early in the ensuing season, at the church in Piccadilly, while daffodils were still blooming in the Basingstoke meadows. It was a very grand wedding, and all London talked of the marriage; some people descanting on the cruelty and wickedness of so ill-assorted a union; others expatiating upon the wonderful

match Lord Allandale had secured for his portionless youngest, and a third section declaring that he ought to have done better for her.

“A girl of such remarkable beauty ought to have looked higher than a man who began life in a coal-pit,” said one of Lady Allandale’s dearest friends.

“But if the man has got out of the pit and made a big fortune in coals, I don’t think a woman with five daughters need complain of her luck,” said another.

“A woman with five daughters ought to consider herself lucky when she gets off one of the five,” remarked a third matron, with some asperity, being herself the mother of an only daughter and reputed beauty, who had been hawked all through England and over half the Continent of Europe without satisfactory result.

The Allandales were content with their bargain, and so was Sir Joseph. He had taken pains to make himself agreeable to the young

lady in every manner that came within the limits of his character and personality. He had consulted her tastes and feelings, deferred to her wishes, and had let her understand that the life she was to lead with him would be a life of perfect independence and wide liberty. She was to be, not his slave, but his queen. She laughed at first at the idea of Sir Joseph as her adorer, and in her girlish talk with her sisters treated the whole affair as a joke; but his earnestness and honesty were not without their influence upon her mind, and after a long and serious conversation with her mother, in which Lady Allandale lifted the decent veil which had been spread over the financial position of the family, and showed her youngest daughter the bleak and barren prospect which lay before her and her sisters, unless some of them married well and were able to help the others, Lady Lucy gave a resigned sigh, and promised that she would try to like Sir Joseph well enough to marry him.

Lucy adored her mother, and was fond of her sisters, though they were of the world worldly. She had dreamed her dream, and had done with all such dreams for ever, she told herself. Sir Joseph's straightforward character and rugged honesty of purpose had won her esteem; and if it were indeed her destiny to marry for the welfare of her family, and to lessen the burden upon her father's diminished income, it would be well for her that she should marry an honest man, whom she could at least respect; love being for evermore impossible. She had seen the young men of her mother's circle, seen them from her privileged position as a young person still in the schoolroom, who was free to sit in the background, and look on as at a play, and she had been impressed by their shallowness and self-assurance. She preferred the conversation of Sir Joseph, who sometimes misplaced an aspirate, but who always talked sensibly, and never pretended to more know-

ledge than he possessed, to the vacuous slang of youth that had graduated on suburban race-courses, learnt dancing at after midnight clubs, and received its final polish in London music halls.

When Sir Joseph, after wooing her in his own fashion with supreme delicacy, asked her in simplest language to be his wife, she answered with a gentle candour which completed his subjugation. She told him that she had given her whole heart away a year ago in a happy summertide at Basingstoke House—given it unasked, and almost unaware of her own feelings, till she awoke to the bitterness and despair of having loved a man who never wooed her, and who was not free to be her lover.

She told her little story of a girl's romance falteringly, and towards the end with tears, which she struggled heroically to suppress.

"I am afraid he guessed my wretched secret," she said, burning blushes suffusing cheek and

brow, as she sat by Sir Joseph's side with lowered eyelids, one cold and trembling hand clasped in those broad, sinewy hands of his, which had never lost the markings of early toil. "I am afraid he read my heart only too well. We are distant cousins, Sir Joseph, and he was almost as familiar as a brother would have been. One day he said very seriously that he had a secret to tell me. I had seen for ever so long that he was unhappy, that the shadow of some hidden grief would creep over him in the midst of our gaiety, when everything in life seemed made for happiness. I was hardly surprised when he told me that he was a miserable man. Early in life, before he left the university, he had married foolishly. That one word was all he ever said to me about his marriage. He had never owned that marriage to his people; but he had done his duty, or, at least, he hoped he had done his duty to his wife. A son was born, and soon after his birth the

poor mother went out of her mind, and then her husband found that there had been madness in her family. He had done what was right, he assured me. He had placed her in the best and kindest care, and he had hoped for her recovery, although the doctors gave him little ground for hope. Years had gone by, and the case was now pronounced hopeless. Her mind was gone, but her physical health promised long life. There was no such thing as divorce in such a case as this. He was her husband to the end of his life."

"Did he tell you that he loved you?" asked Sir Joseph, under his breath.

"No, no, no," protested the girl eagerly.
"Not by one word, not by one look."

"Then he is a good man, and deserves a better fate. God reward you, my dear, for having opened your heart to me. I am not afraid to try and guard that pure heart from every temptation that can assail an old man's

wife—if you only like me well enough to trust yourself to my loving care, Lucy.”

“If I am to marry at all I would rather be your wife than anyone else’s,” she answered gravely; and thus ended Sir Joseph’s wooing.

From that hour till the last hour of her life Lady Lucy never complained of her portion in this world. Sir Joseph kept his promise in the spirit as well as to the letter. He was a devoted husband, and his wife reigned as a queen in that northern settlement where the name of Higginson was a charm to conjure with. She had her model village, where even the men and boys who worked in the pits were able to live with some degree of comfort. She had her schools, and a church of her own creation, built and endowed at Sir Joseph’s cost; her cottage hospital, her almshouses for the aged and helpless. Within that small kingdom by the northern sea, she was worshipped as a saint; and in Arlington Street she was able to hold her own with her contemporaries and equals in the social

maelström, while she had the proud privilege of helping three of her sisters to marry creditably and comfortably, and thereby to reflect honour upon the house of Mountford. If, having married rank rather than money, those ladies were inclined to look down upon their worthy brother-in-law, Sir Joseph never allowed resentment to harden his heart or tighten his purse-strings against them or their belongings. He let the husbands fish in his salmon river and shoot his pheasants, and the wives ride his horses, and recuperate their exhausted energies in the comfort of his country house. He never refused to become sponsor for any of the numerous babies, or withheld the expected goblet or porringer of parcel gilt. In a word, he used his wealth in a large-minded fashion, and succeeded in being talked of by his four sisters-in-law throughout the length and breadth of society as "a dear old thing."

Sir Joseph had been married nearly three

years when a son and heir was born in the great grey Tudor house at Ellerslie, a son whose advent brought joy unspeakable to the father's great, honest heart; but this flower in the garden of domestic life was a pale and fragile blossom, and drooped and withered before the end of a year. In the following year there came a daughter, but the father, who had seen his hopes blasted, was slow to let his love go out to this new-comer. He was afraid of loving her too well, lest he should be called upon to suffer the anguish of a second bereavement.

The girl-baby throve, however, and was the delight of her mother's life, the all-absorbing occupation and amusement of Lady Lucy's happiest years. Millais' picture of mother and daughter hangs in the hall of Killander Castle, to which mansion it was transferred after Sir Joseph's death—the portrait of a woman in the full flush of mature beauty, with a tall, willowy girl, in a pinafore, leaning against her mother's shoulder, with sunny tresses ruffled

as after some childish sport, and solemn, dreaming eyes—the eyes which, shining star-like in the baby face, had won for her the name of Sibyl.

Sibyl was eleven when that picture was painted, and before her twelfth birthday the picture was all that remained to Sir Joseph of his loved and lovely wife. She died in the pride of her strength and beauty, being thrown out of the light phaeton in which she had driven for years in perfect safety. A nervous horse, a narrow road, a great coal-waggon in the way, and swift, sudden death for the woman whom Sir Joseph Higginson had worshipped with unwavering devotion from the hour she laid her little white hand in his and accepted him as her husband. If she had not given him the love that youth gives to youth, she had at least been true and steadfast through all their years of wedded life. She had shown no sign of weariness or disgust, she had never depreciated her husband or hinted at her own superiority, by

right of early training and patrician birth. She had carried with meekness, and yet with dignity, the power which great wealth gives to the mistress of a household. Her husband's life had been rounded into perfect harmony by this woman; and in losing her it seemed to Joseph Higginson as if there were nothing left for his grey hairs but to go down in sorrow to the grave.

He was of too tough a fibre for grief to kill. He went on living somehow, though the light was quenched in the lamp, and the music was dead in the lute. He tried to comfort himself with the love of his daughter, his only child and heiress, Sibyl, who grew in beauty as the years ripened and waned. She was very tender and devoted to him, but she could not fill the empty place in his heart. One only had he loved with the whole strength of his rugged nature, and she was gone. He took to money-making as the one pursuit that brought distraction, occupation, fatigue of brain, and soothing sleep as

the sequence of labour. He had long ago made his fortune, and ruled off the total of a life's industry, eminently satisfied with the result; but now he entered himself afresh in the great race for gold, and, stung by the grief that gnawed his heartstrings, he who had been hitherto cautious in all his investments speculated wildly, and by a curious irony of fate was successful in every enterprise. During those years of his widowhood his name was a power on the Stock Exchange, and men flung their money eagerly into any scheme in which he was interested. He was said to have trebled his fortune in that headlong race. To him the business of money getting had superseded every other interest, personal or general. The Stock Exchange was his board of green cloth, and he played the game of speculation with all the passionate concentration of the habitual gambler—the man who is a gambler, and nothing else.

During this period of financial activity Sir

Joseph lived for two-thirds of each year in Arlington Street, preferring to be near the scene of action, within a half-hour drive of the actual money market; but his mines were still something to him, and he spent the last of the summer months and the whole of the autumn at Ellerslie Park, where Sibyl lived with her two governesses, Miss Minchin, a homely English person who had been with her pupil from the nursery days of early reading lessons in words of one syllable, and Fräulein Stahlherz, an accomplished Hanoverian, who was familiar with almost every phrase of Wagner's orchestration, played all Beethoven's sonatas that are playable on the pianoforte, knew Goethe and Schiller by heart, and was mistress of French and Italian, to say nothing of English, which she spoke more correctly than anyone else at Ellerslie. Under this lady's conscientious tuition, and with the faithful Minchin to minister to her comforts, look after her health, see that she never sat in damp boots or suffered

from chilblains, that the dentist was duly consulted at regular intervals, and that tonics were exhibited at the least indication of languor, Sibyl had grown to eighteen years of age before it occurred to her father that she was a young woman, and that she had a right to take her place in the world as his daughter. She would have to be presented and introduced to society, that society upon which Sir Joseph had persistently turned his back ever since his wife's death.

The idea of this necessity worried and embarrassed him. His wife's mother, Lady Allandale, was dead, and her son's wife, Lady Braemar, was a person whose house was eminently fashionable, but by no means the most fitting house for girlish innocence. Sir Joseph felt that the time was at hand when he must provide a chaperon for his daughter. There was one ready to his hand in the person of her spinster aunt, Lady Selina Mountford, a lady of small means, very well received in the very best

society, and familiar with all the works and ways of the great world.

He felt the difficulty of the position all the more because there was somebody else to be thought of at Ellerslie. A young woman who, without Sir Joseph having ever intended as much, had become in some wise an adopted elder sister of Sibyl's, who had shared all the privileges of Fräulein Stahlherz's erudition, and some slender portion of Miss Minchin's assiduity, and who, albeit seven years older than Sibyl, was still young enough to feel the cruel contrast between the great heiress whose appearance would be an event in the fashionable world and her own insignificance.

A year after Lady Lucy's death the two governesses and their pupil were startled one dull wintry afternoon by the appearance of a mouldy leathern vehicle, drawn by a knock-kneed bay horse, and popularly known in the district as the station fly. On the box of the station fly, and almost obscuring the driver, was

a large grey trunk, metal bound, and of foreign aspect.

Governesses and pupil stared at this phenomenon from the bay window of the spacious schoolroom, and as they stared the halt and elderly coachman descended painfully from his box and opened the door of the vehicle, whereupon there came out of the leathern darkness a young fresh face, with rose-red cheeks and sloe-black eyes, and a bush of black hair brushed upward from a broad, square forehead.

This bright and vivid countenance was set upon the well-shaped figure of a young woman who might be any age between eighteen and twenty-five. She was tall, broad-chested, with finely rounded arms that showed under her close-fitting black stuff gown. She was clad wholly in black, a dull dense black which looked like deep mourning, although she wore no crape. Her dress was plain to Puritanism.

"She must be a new housemaid," said Miss

Minchin; "but Ball ought to know better than to bring her to the hall door."

Ball had dragged the stranger's trunk up the steps into the porch by this time, while the footman looked on. The new-comer disappeared within the great stone porch; Ball, the flyman, clambered on to the box, the fly drove off, and Sibyl and her governesses went back to their various occupations—Fräulein to the perusal of the last number of the *Rundschau*, Miss Minchin to an elaborate task of needlework on her own account, being the revival and reconstruction of her last summer's Sunday silk gown, and Sibyl to her practice of one of Chopin's mazurkas.

No more was seen of the dark-eyed young woman for a week, when Sibyl met her one afternoon in a passage near the housekeeper's room. They looked at each other with mutual interest, open on the part of Sibyl, furtive on the part of the stranger.

Could she be a servant? Sibyl wondered.

Assuredly not a housemaid, for the housemaids at Ellerslie Park all wore a livery of lavender cotton in the morning, and were white-capped and aproned of an afternoon. This young woman was capless and apronless. The bloom on her cheeks had faded somewhat since the day she alighted from the station fly. Her dark eyes had a troubled look.

Sibyl was on her way to the housekeeper's room, to ask for something for a sick child in one of those cottages which had been her mother's kingdom, and over which she now reigned, a youthful queen.

"Will you send little Jane Barber soup once a day, and jelly and custard pudding on alternate days, Mrs. Morison?" she asked of the comfortable-looking housekeeper, whose ordinarily placid countenance was wrinkled in a strenuous study of the butcher's book.

"Yes, ma'am, soup and jelly shall be sent. Poor little mite, I'm afraid she's not long for

this world. Is there anything else I can do, Miss Sibyl ? ”

Mrs. Morison's address fluctuated between the formal “ ma'am ” and the affectionate “ Miss Sibyl.” She had kept Sir Joseph's house when the young heiress was born, and worshipped her accordingly.

“ Yes, Mrs. Morison, there is something I very much want you to do for me,” replied Sibyl, quickly. “ Tell me all about that pretty young woman in black who came here in a fly just a week ago.”

Mrs. Morison's brow grew even more troubled than it had been over the butcher's book.

“ Indeed, Miss Sibyl, I can't tell you much, not if I was to tell you all I know. The young person dropped from the clouds, as one may say. I hadn't had one word of notice of her coming, from Sir Joseph or anybody else, and if she hadn't brought me a letter from him I might have taken her for an impostor, and turned her out-of-doors.”

“A letter from father? Do let me see it. Is he coming soon? I am so longing for him.”

“He doesn’t say a word about coming home, ma’am. The letter is all about the young woman.”

“Let me see, let me see,” Sibyl cried eagerly, holding out her hand for the letter.

Mrs. Morison had to unlock a desk, and to select the said letter from among various other documents, a slow business, and seeming slower to Sibyl’s impatience. At last, however, the letter was produced, taken out of the envelope, carefully unfolded, and re-perused by Mrs. Morison before she handed it to her master’s daughter.

Sibyl read as follows :—

“The Carlton, Thursday evening.

“MY GOOD MORISON,

“Marie Arnold, the bearer of this letter, has been lately left an orphan, and I have taken upon myself to provide her with a home. She is of humble birth, and has no

grand expectations. I wish, therefore, that while giving her a comfortable home at Ellerslie, and taking her as much as possible under your own wing, you should not allow her to acquire any fine notions, or to fancy herself a young lady. You will be kind enough to find her some light employment in the household. If she is clever with her needle, as I am told she is, you might allow her to be useful to Miss Higginson, and in the schoolroom generally. I am told that she has been fairly educated in a convent school, in the South of France, where she was born. She is a Roman Catholic. I hope this fact will not be used to her prejudice, and that she will be encouraged to attend the services of her own church, so long as she herself desires to remain a member of that church.

“You will please provide her wardrobe, and give her a reasonable amount of pocket-money. She will, of course, have a bedroom of her own, and not be placed on a footing with servants.

“Yours sincerely,

“J. H.”

“Not on a footing with the servants,” repeated Mrs. Morison, as Sibyl handed her the letter. “There’s my difficulty, you see, Miss. Find her light occupation—keep her ideas humble—and yet not make a servant of her. It isn’t easy.”

“Yes, it is, you dear old Morison. Let her be in the schoolroom, and have her bedroom near the schoolroom, and let her come and sit with me in my own room very often, in my recreation hours. I like her looks. And if she is French, she will help me to improve in my French conversation. And she can tell me all about the South, and she can go for long rambles with me. Miss Minchin and the Fräulein are wretched creatures to go out with. Neither of them knows the meaning of the word ramble. They can only walk. Tell Marie to come to my room this afternoon at half-past two o’clock. I am free from then till four, and she and I can have a good talk.”

“Not allow her to acquire fine notions, or to

fancy herself a lady," repeated the housekeeper, reading a passage from Sir Joseph's letter, with a puzzled brow. "I don't know how that will hold with letting her be your companion—to go out walking with you—or to be with you in your own pretty sitting-room. I don't know if that will quite answer to Sir Joseph's instructions, Miss Sibyl."

"But I do. Father means that Marie and I are to be friendly, or he would never have suggested her being useful in the schoolroom. The schoolroom means me. She shall be useful. She shall help me to support the burden of two governesses. That will be a work of real utility," cried Sibyl, with a happy laugh.

Mrs. Morison had heard that joyous laughter very seldom since Lady Lucy's death, and her heart warmed at the sound. The girl had been the sunshine of the house before that bitter parting between devoted mother and adoring child; but that great grief had clouded the joyous nature, and for the greater part of the

year of mourning it may be said that Sibyl endured life rather than that she lived.

The sound of her own laughter shocked her even to-day. She looked down at her black frock with a stifled sob.

“Oh, how can I feel happy, even for an instant,” she murmured, in self-reproach, “when she is gone?”

“I’ll send the young person to your room at half-past two precisely,” said Mrs. Morison, with a cheery air. “And I shall be very grateful to her, my pretty one, if she helps you to forget your loss,” mused Mrs. Morison, when Sibyl had gone; and then the worthy woman polished her spectacles, which had suddenly grown dim.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE FAR-OFF LAND.

SIBYL'S own particular retreat was in a tower at the southern angle of Ellerslie House, and it was one of the prettiest rooms in a house where beauty and harmony of furniture and decoration had been achieved regardless of cost, and with the aid of all the new lights which high art has cast upon our domestic surroundings. The room was octagonal, and the eight panels accommodated frescoes of the four seasons, alternated with four allegorical figures representing Dawn, Noon, Evening, and Night, these executed in a decidedly French manner, at which sturdy English art might lift the nose and shrug the shoulder of contempt, but which for decorative

purposes was admirable. Madras curtains of pale amber, chairs and sofa covered with sea-green silk, piano, tables, book-shelves, and mantelpiece all in white enamelled wood, gave delicate brightness to the room, which was lighted by four tall casement windows overlooking sea and moor, and the village of Ardliston straggling along the edge of the cliff, with its snug little harbour sunk deep in the hollow of the hills. Sibyl could see all the outer world for which she cared from those four windows. She had spent an occasional summer at Scarborough, and she had seen the glory of the English lakes; but the world she loved was this world of far-reaching moorland and far-reaching ocean.

At half-past two in the sunny summer afternoon Marie Arnold stood in the golden light, looking with wondering eyes that slowly made the circuit of the room and then concentrated their gaze upon the owner of these luxurious surroundings, who stood smiling at

her, a gracious figure, and pale sweet face, a tall slip of a girl, slenderly and delicately formed, and with only the promise of beauty, a figure and face which were both curiously contrastive with the strongly built and well rounded form, brilliant black eyes, and vivid colouring of the young woman from the sunny south.

Sibyl asked her if she could speak English.

She replied in broken French, "Ver leteel," but her father was an Englishman, all the same, she informed Sibyl, and she hoped to learn English very quickly.

"Oh, mais non, non, non," cried Sibyl, "learn very slowly; do not learn at all," she went on in her pretty girlish English-French. "I am going to talk French with you always. I shall get on so much faster with you than Fräulein, because you will never correct me. You will not, will you, Marie? You won't take the faintest notice of my faults in grammar, and you will only stop me when I am so bad

that you can't tell what I mean. Is that a bargain?"

"But, Mademoiselle speaks like an angel," protested Marie, with her pretty southern flattery.

"No, no, I am wretched as to grammar. Fräulein stops me every minute: first a wrong tense, and then a wrong gender, and then the form of the sentence is all wrong, and then I have said *devant* when it ought to have been *avant*; or *sauf* when I should have said *excepte*. As if it mattered! That is not the way to teach a girl to speak a foreign language. The way is to let her talk and talk and talk, as the birds sing, until her instinct teaches her what is right and what is wrong. Come and sit on my sofa, Marie—isn't it a darling sofa?—and tell me all about yourself, and the country where you were born."

Marie sighed, and obeyed, and presently they were sitting on the sofa, the fair head close beside the dark shining hair that had grown

in the sun, and which had sunny gleams, even in its darkness. The large dark eyes had golden lights in them, as if they too had taken their beauty from the southern sun.

“Tell me, tell me all,” urged Sibyl, always in French, delighted to be able to talk without apprehension of the *Fräulein*’s nice criticism, “unless it grieves you to talk of your home.”

“No, no, *mam’selle*, it does not grieve me. I have wept all my tears. I have wept my fill since my mother died—just a fortnight ago.”

“Only a fortnight! And my mother died only a year ago. Ah, I can feel for you,” and the white, slim hand stole into the French girl’s coarser hand, and tears rained from Sibyl’s violet eyes.

The very name Mother was a charm to make her weep.

“She was not always kind, *mam’selle*, but I was sorry all the same when she died. She

was only ill for a few days, and she was unconscious towards the last, so that we could never say good-bye. She drifted out of life in a long sleep, and I was left alone there in our little villa at Mougins, alone with the poor dead mother, and not knowing what was to become of me any more than the great white cat she had been fond of knew what was to become of him."

"Had you no uncles and aunts, and people?" inquired Sibyl wonderingly.

She was so richly provided with relatives upon the Allandale side of her house—to say nothing of numerous humbler Higginsons—that she could not conceive the idea of an existence unsurrounded by kith and kin.

"No, mam'selle, I have no one, and I never heard that my mother had any friend in this world, except Sir Higginson."

"You mean my father, Sir Joseph."

"Yes, Sir Joseph Higginson."

"But how did your mother, so far away,

happen to win my father's friendship?" inquired Sibyl.

"Her husband was an engineer, who worked under Sir Higginson when he was establishing great ironworks at Fontaine-le-roi, near the Belgian frontier," explained Marie Arnold. "That was many years ago, before I was born. My father was killed one night on the railway six months before I was born, and Sir Higginson was very good to my mother. She was not a peasant, mam'selle, and yet she was not quite a lady. She had no dot when my father married her, and she had never learnt to work for her bread. When she was left a widow with an infant she was quite helpless. She would have starved perhaps if your father had not taken pity upon her. 'Your husband was killed while he was in my service,' he told her, 'and I shall provide for you for the rest of your days, and for your child also,' and he kept his word nobly. My mother went back to her own country when I was a year old, and we

lived in a little white house at Mougins, looking over the hills, and the pine woods and the sea."

"Where is Mougins?"

"It is a little town on a hill near Cannes. Mam'selle knows Cannes, perhaps."

"No; but I have heard my aunts and cousins talk of it. Some of them go there every winter. And so you were reared near Cannes, on the shores of the Mediterranean? I suppose you think that sea over there ugly, in comparison?" said Sibyl, pointing to the ocean she loved.

"It is greyer than our sea, mam'selle, and it looks always like our sea in bad weather."

"And what do you think of our hills and moors?" asked Sibyl, with a somewhat peremptory air.

"Very ugly, mam'selle. I miss the rolling olive woods, the cypresses, the valleys where the roses grow. I miss the perfumed air, and the sunshine most of all."

"Don't you call that sunshine?" asked Sibyl, pointing to the southward windows.

“Very fair for a sunny afternoon in February, mam’selle, not for June.”

“Ah, in June, no doubt, your Mougins would be simply intolerable, like a sandy desert in Africa.”

“No, mam’selle, there is always a cool breeze across the hills, a breath of the unseen snow mountains, and there is always shade in the pine woods and freshness from the sea. It is only foreigners who fancy they cannot live in our country in the summer.”

“Did my father ever come to see you at Mougins?”

“Yes, mam’selle, years and years ago; before I went to the convent.”

“What convent? You are not a nun, are you?”

Marie laughed, for the first time in Sibyl’s hearing.

“No, mam’selle, but I was educated at a convent at Grasse.”

“Is that far from Mougins?”

“Only a few miles. You can see one place from the other, across the valley. I used to look from the convent windows, and I could almost distinguish the green shutters and the red roof of my mother’s house, and the almond trees in bloom in the garden soon after Christmas.”

“And so you were educated at a convent? How odd!”

“I am a Roman Catholic, *mam’selle*, and most Roman Catholic children are educated in convents.”

“Well, you are to be in the schoolroom, my father says.”

“I am to make myself useful in some way, *mam’selle*, Sir Joseph said, when I saw him in London.”

“Did you see him—quite lately?” Sibyl asked, eagerly.

“Yes, *mam’selle*. He sent a person—his private secretary, I believe—to take me to England directly after my mother’s funeral.”

“ Yes, yes, old Mr. Orlebar. I know him very well. He lives here when father is at home. A funny old man, isn't he ? ”

“ He was very kind to me, mam'selle, all through the long journey, and then he took me to a beautiful house—like a palace, almost—in London, where I saw Sir Joseph, and he was very kind, and he told me that he would always be my friend, as long as I conducted myself properly, and he wrote a letter to his house-keeper. And then I stayed one night in that splendid house, and saw the picture gallery, and all the beautiful things in the great saloon, and early next morning Mr. Orlebar took me to the station, and put me into the train, and told me what I was to do when I came to the end of my railway journey. And that is all my history, mam'selle.”

“ Poor Marie,” sighed Sibyl, ever so compassionately, “ I am so sorry for you. Did you love your mother very dearly—as dearly as I loved mine, I wonder.”

The wonder sprang partly from Marie's dry eyes. Sibyl could hardly speak of her dead mother without a rush of tears.

Marie hung her head, and paused before she replied.

"I loved some of the nuns better than I loved my mother," she faltered. "Mother Anastasie, for instance. Ah, she was so good to me. It almost broke my heart to leave the convent, because of parting with her. I used to walk over to Grasse to hear mass at the convent chapel every Saint's Day, but it was to see Mother Anastasie that I went so far, for I could have heard mass in our church at Mougins. She was always pale and delicate, and they said that there was something wrong with her heart, but she taught more and worked harder than any of the nuns. She taught music and drawing. All the children loved her, but I don't think one of them loved her better than I. And just a year ago on Corpus Christi I went to the convent, and missed her in her place at

the organ, and after the service one of the lay sisters came to me, with her eyes streaming, and took me by the hand and led me to the burial ground where there was a new-made grave heaped with roses. She could scarcely speak for sobbing, but at last she told me how Mother Anastasie had been found only two days before sitting at the chapel organ in the afternoon sunshine, her hands still upon the keys, but her head fallen back against the edge of the high oak chair. She had died like that, *mam'selle*, alone, no one near her. They had heard the sound of the organ cease after she had played one of Mozart's finest glorias, as they walked in the garden at their recreation hour, and they thought that Mother Anastasie was staying in the chapel for prayer and meditation, as often happened with her. They watched the door of the chapel, hoping she would come out in time to take a little walk with them; but the bell rang for the class, and they all left the garden. It was an hour later

before anyone took the alarm and went to look for her."

Marie's eyes were no longer tearless, and her last words were made almost inaudible by her emotion.

"You must have loved her very dearly," said Sibyl, full of sympathy.

"Yes, mam'selle—she was my spiritual mother, the mother of my mind and soul. If I were to live to be ever so old I think I could never commit a sin without her image rising up before me to stop me from wickedness. My own mother was very kind to me; but she was, oh, so different from Mother Anastasie. She loved gossip, and cards, and pleasure of all kinds. She did not care for books, or flowers, or pictures. She went to High Mass every Sunday morning, but that was all. She sat about on the walls, or in the olive woods, with her neighbours all the rest of the week, except when she could get anyone to drive her to Cannes, to see the fine shops and fine people."

“She was not unkind to you?” questioned Sibyl.

“No, she was not unkind; she never beat me.”

Sibyl shuddered at the mere idea of a mother beating her child, she whose only image of motherhood was an image of supreme gentleness.

“But her pleasures were not my pleasures,” pursued the French girl. “There was no link between us, and the two years that I spent at Mougins after I left the convent were the dulllest years of my life. I missed my old companions, and the music, and games, and the studies even—though I used once to think them a burden—and my soul sickened at the gossip, and the cards, and the quarrels—quarrels about nothing, a cracked oil jar, a handful of vegetables, loud talking from one door to another, quarrels that seemed to begin and end for the sake of quarrelling.”

“Poor Marie! There are no quarrels here.

Fräulein is rather worrying, but Miss Minchin is as good as gold, in spite of her fidgety little ways. I call her Mousie, because she is brownish-grey, and quick, and quiet, like a mouse. She doesn't mind. But you must not call her Mousie—not just at first.”

“No, no, mam'selle, that is understood,” replied Marie, discreetly.

This was the beginning of a lasting friendship, which grew with the passage of time. Marie was accepted in the schoolroom as a useful companion alike by governesses and pupil. She had been taught to use her needle with exquisite art, and the Fräulein was not above getting her handkerchiefs marked by those skilful fingers, in return for which service she helped Marie to acquire a little German, without taking the trouble to give her formal lessons. Marie was quick, and learnt any new thing with wondrous ease. She had a fine ear for music, and delighted in Sibyl's piano.

As a companion in Sibyl's walks she was

incomparable, for she knew not weariness, and her light, springy step carried her over the moorland as easily as if she had been some wild creature reared upon those breezy downs. She was Sibyl's friend and playfellow for five years, with Sir Joseph Higginson's full approval, and it was only now, when Sibyl had attained her eighteenth birthday and all the Mountford aunts were beginning to pester Sir Joseph about her appearance in society, that he began to wonder how he was to dispose of the humble companion when the heiress came to take her proper position in the great world.

"It is all very well to keep Sibyl back for a year or so," said the only unmarried aunt, Lady Selina Mountford, who took upon herself to advise all her married sisters, their husbands, and belongings, and used to lie awake o' nights in her pretty little house in May Fair, worrying herself about all her families' anxieties. "It is all very well for you to keep her buried alive at Ellerslie for another year. As your heiress she

will have a choice of eligible partis whenever she may appear; but she ought to come out before she is twenty. She looks rather thin and delicate at present. I think she may improve in a year," said Lady Selina, as if she were talking of a turkey that was being fattened for Christmas, or a young horse that was "furnishing."

Sir Joseph promised to bring out his daughter before she was twenty, and thus, upon one subject at least, freed Lady Selina's nights from care.

"There is always something to keep me awake," sighed the spinster. "Braemar's boys are too terrible. How he is ever to pay their Oxford debts passes my comprehension. And now I am told they play baccarat at some dreadful club in London, and Felix threatened his father he would marry a girl he met at the Stephanotis, another dreadful club where they dance."

There was thus a year of respite for Sir

Joseph, during which he might be able to find a comfortable settlement in the matrimonial line for the humble companion, so that she might not too keenly feel the difference in her position and that of Sibyl as sovereign mistress of the house in Arlington street, and with all the town eager to pay her homage.

“I don’t want her to feel the difference,” mused Sir Joseph with a profound sigh, as he paced the terrace in front of his great stone mansion at Ellerslie. “It wouldn’t be fair that she should. It wouldn’t be fair.”

He sighed again deeply, for as yet no eligible pretendant to the hand of Marie Arnold had appeared in that remote northern region; and he began to fear that none might be found in the district.

The girl was a Papist, objection number one—but an objection which had been disregarded by a needy evangelical curate, who, on ascertaining that Sir Joseph meant to give his dependent a handsome dowry—amount not specified—

had urged his desire to make her his wife, and possibly to snatch a brand from the burning by winning her over to the Reformed and strictly Evangelical Church.

The alliance would have been respectable, as the young Levite, though needy, was of a good Northumberland family, and of unimpeachable morals; but Marie did not like the curate, and would not hear of marrying him.

“I shall never marry,” she told Sir Joseph, “I want to be Sibyl’s slave and companion always.”

“My dear girl, that is all very well while Sibyl is here,” replied Sir Joseph, “but when she goes to London and is swallowed up in the gaieties of the London season, with hardly an hour of leisure for home life—you can’t be her companion then.”

“Let me be her maid, then, and wait upon her, and sit up for her at night, and help her to undress, and hear all about her pleasures and gaieties.”

“No, Marie, not a servant. You must never be her servant—you must never think of yourself as a servant. I want to see you happily married before Sibyl marries. You are five years older than Sibyl—three and twenty. You must have been in love half a dozen times, I should think.”

“Never,” said Marie, with an emphatic shrug. “I have even tried to fall in love—with a curate ; not this one, but the tall, good-looking young man who was here before him, and whose sympathies were all with my church—with that young doctor, Dr. Dewsnap’s son and assistant. But there is no such thing as love in my nature, I think. I adore Sibyl, and I love you ; and that is all the love I am capable of feeling.”

“Ah, we shall see, Marie. Trees that are long in flowering bear very fine blossoms. The aloe, for instance, and the magnolia,” said Sir Joseph, patting her shoulder, as he trudged along by her side, a sturdy, active man,

although his seventieth birthday had been kept by the pitmen with beef and beer, and noisy rural sports, and dancing and fireworks, nearly a year before.

He was very fond of Marie Arnold. He liked to have her to sit with him and his daughter of an evening. He liked to hear her sing her pretty French chansons, full of coquetry and dainty love, blue skies and sunlit valleys, fountains, orange trees, eglantine and honeysuckle, bees and butterflies, songs that touched none of life's serious phases, nor ever hinted at old age or death.

In this springtide of Sir Joseph's seventy-first year, he happened to be at Ellerslie for a short time, with Marie as his only companion, and this companionship drew them nearer together than they had ever been before.

Never until now had Sir Joseph been at Ellerslie without his young daughter to hang upon his footsteps, and ride and drive with him, and play billiards with him, or sing and play to

him of an evening. Marie had been a secondary figure while Sibyl was present, but when April began Sibyl was at Hastings, whither she had been despatched suddenly at Dr. Dewsnap's instigation, to cure a cough which had hung upon her all the winter. There were great things being done in the pits, alterations and extensions which required Sir Joseph's supervision, so he had been unable to go with his daughter—who had been confided to the care of Miss Minchin, Miss Stahlherz having gone back to her native Hanover—and for the first time in his widowhood he found himself pacing the long drawing-room at Ellerslie, or taking his morning constitutional on the terrace, without that graceful figure near at hand.

She was to come home as soon as the cough was actually cured, by warrant of the Hastings doctor, and in the meantime she wrote to her father almost daily, telling him of all her walks and rides, her excursions to Battle or to Pevensey, her readings of the Norman Conquest

in Thierry, Green, and Freeman, and her longing to return to her father and Ellerslie.

His life in that great house would have been very dreary—for he had no visitors at this time, and his secretary, Mr. Orlebar, was far from a lively person—if he had not found Marie an attentive and vivacious companion, pleased to do all that Sibyl was accustomed to do for him.

Mrs. Morison shrugged her shoulders when she saw the foreign waif filling the absent daughter's place. She liked Marie, but she disapproved of that young person's exaltation.

"He told me not to give her any fine notions when first she came here," mused the house-keeper; "and now he is giving her fine notions himself. A young woman who spends all her evenings in the long drawing-room will never be contented to take a humble position in after-life."

It was not more than three or four days after Sibyl left Ellerslie, when a stranger appeared

upon the scene; a gentleman who called upon Sir Joseph one afternoon, and sent in his card, upon which appeared the name of

Brandon Mountford,
Travellers' Club.

Any Mountford was secure of a welcome from Sir Joseph, who was never tired of showing kindness to his wife's kindred; but the name of Brandon touched him with a curious thrill which was closely akin to pain.

Brandon was the name of the distant cousin to whom Lucy Mountford had given the first-fruits of her young heart. That Brandon Mountford had died in India, two years after Lady Lucy's death; but he had left a son, and in all probability this was the son.

These thoughts went swiftly through Sir Joseph's brain as he sat at his desk, looking at the card, which had been brought to him in his study—the room in which he interviewed

agents and tenants, and transacted business of all kinds connected with his vast possessions.

“Mr. Mountford is in the drawing-room, I suppose?” he said. “I’ll go to him.”

He found the stranger standing in front of a wide window, looking landwards over the valley, and the river winding through it. A man of about eight and twenty, Sir Joseph thought, tall, well set up, with a fine, frank countenance, well cut features, the Mountford nose, which inclined to the aquiline, bright blue eyes, light brown hair, curling close to the well shaped head, and a complexion tanned by a hotter sun than ever shone upon yonder valley.

“I am very glad to see you at Ellerslie, Mr. Mountford,” said the old man, cordially holding out a broad hand in friendly welcome. “Come to have a look at our North Countree, I suppose. You must come and put up here for a week or two, and let me show you a coal pit if you have never seen one.”

“You are too good, Sir Joseph; but I haven’t come here with any intention of quartering myself upon you, though I have come to ask you a favour. Here’s Braemar’s letter, to vouch for me as an insignificant but not disreputable member of the house of Mountford. I happened to hear from him of your splendid salmon river, and was seized with a longing to cast a fly in the waters he praised so warmly.”

Brandon Mountford here produced an unsealed letter, over which Sir Joseph ran his eye carelessly.

“You want to have a go at our salmon. Well, my dear fellow, fish away to your heart’s content. There are plenty of scaly gentlemen, but they are decidedly shy, and you may be up at five o’clock every morning for a week and yet not early enough to catch them. Then after a few blank days, perhaps, you may get a run of luck. I used to enjoy the sport myself thirty years ago, when I was still

young enough to wade breast high in the river in a Scotch mist from seven in the morning to seven at night, and relish my dinner and my whisky toddy all the better for the day's work. Where are you staying, Mr. Mountford?"

"At the Higginson Arms at Ardliston."

"A cosy old inn and a capital landlady, but I think we can make you rather more comfortable at Ellerslie. You'd better go and fetch your portmanteau."

"Indeed, Sir Joseph, I had no idea——" protested Mountford.

"You will be nearer the salmon," pursued his host, "and I can give you a keeper who knows every yard of the water. You'll find this house uncommonly quiet, for I am here on business, and have invited no one since Christmas. My daughter is away, and I have only a—sort of—adopted niece, who cuts my newspapers for me and reads me to sleep after dinner—a nice, bright girl, who sings charmingly."

Sir Joseph grew suddenly thoughtful. What if this Brandon Mountford, who had dropped from the clouds, were the very man he wanted—an honest man, and a husband for Marie Arnold? He liked the look of the young man—a gentleman to the tips of his fingers—good blood showed itself in every line of face and figure—penniless, no doubt. The Mountfords were all poor—property in Ireland for the most part—family numerous—chieftain weighed down by innumerable portions and allowances to daughters and younger sons.

“Braemar tells me you have travelled in Africa,” said Sir Joseph, glancing at the letter in his hand, “and that you have won some renown already as a hunter of big game.”

“My gun is my only road to fame, Sir Joseph. Yes, I have spent five years on the Dark Continent.”

“You must have gone there very young.”

“I sailed for the Cape soon after my twenty-first birthday, and within a year of my father’s

death. Africa has been my country from that time to this. I am only in England as a visitor."

"You mean to go back?"

"Yes, I mean to go home."

"A strange fancy for a young man with all the world before him."

"I know no grander world than the shores of Zambesi, no happier life than the freedom of the wilderness."

"You can tell me your adventures over a glass of Mouton to-night. Go and get your port-manteau."

"You are too kind, Sir Joseph; but are you sure I shan't be in the way? If you have come to the north on business you may find yourself bored by a visitor."

"I never put myself in the way of being bored," answered the old man, bluntly. "You may be sure I shouldn't ask you if I didn't want you here."

"Then I shall be delighted to come," said

Mountford, frankly. "I only regret that I shall not see my young cousin. Braemar was full of her praises."

"She is a good little girl," said Sir Joseph. "I don't think my life would be worth sixpence a day without her."

And then his thoughts went back to the girl's mother, and to those far-away days when he sat by Lady Lucy's side in the Hertford Street drawing-room, and she told him her little story of a misplaced love. Was this Brandon Mountford the son of that Brandon Mountford? he wondered, nervously anxious to be enlightened.

"Your father was in the army, I think," he said, tentatively.

"Yes, in the Engineers. He died in India, as brave a soldier as ever fought there."

"And your mother, is she no longer living?"

The young man's face flushed at the question, and a troubled look came into his eyes.

"My mother died fourteen years ago, while I was at Wellington. She had been—a great in-

valid—ever since my birth,” he answered, with painful pauses in the final sentence.

Sir Joseph felt that he had been cruel to push the question, but he had wanted to be sure of his facts; and now he was sure. This man was the son of that distant cousin to whom Lucy’s young heart had gone out, and who doubtless had given her love for love; the man so unhappily mated, so faithful to that tragic bond.

“If I can do him a good turn I will,” thought Sir Joseph. “He shan’t go back to Africa if I can hinder it. He would make a capital husband for Marie. They would be a splendid couple.”

Brandon brought his portmanteau and fishing tackle to Ellerslie in the course of the afternoon, and dined alone with Sir Joseph in a snug tapestried parlour which the millionaire preferred to the great dining-room, with its lofty carved oak buffet and decoration of gold plate. The two men sat a long time over their wine, though Brandon did but small justice to Sir

Joseph's famous Mouton. He was a tremendous smoker, however, and consumed nearly a dozen cigarettes while Sir Joseph entertained him with reminiscences of his juvenile struggles, and the hazards and successes of his manhood. It was late when they went to the long drawing-room, and Brandon, who had forgotten his host's mention of an adopted niece, was startled at seeing a young woman, neatly dressed in black silk, with a bunch of tea roses at her waistband, seated reading near a lamp-lit table. She had not dined with them, yet she had the air of being one of the family.

Sir Joseph introduced Mr. Mountford to this young lady, who was called Miss Arnold, yet who spoke with a French accent, and whose dark eyes and warm olive complexion were decidedly un-English.

"And now, Marie, you can sing us one of your ballads," said Sir Joseph, settling himself in a luxurious chair, with evident resignation to impending slumber.

He was asleep before Marie had finished her first song, and Brandon and the young lady were practically alone, a fact which seemed less embarrassing to her than to the man not long returned from Mashonaland, and from a society in which bulk, beads, and blackness are the chief characteristics of female beauty. It was a new thing for Brandon to find himself in a solitude of two with a handsome young woman, whose history, associations, and character were utterly unknown to him.

She sang the inevitable "Si tu savais" with a good deal of feeling, and in a rich contralto voice; and then De Musset's "Ninon," and then a little Provençal ballad, and then another, at Brandon's urgent request. When he could not with decency ask her to sing any more, he entreated her to play something—Chopin, Thalberg, Strauss, Sebastian Bach, Porpora, Lulli—anything she chose. He would have kept her at the piano all the evening if he could, rather than face the ordeal of conver-

sation with a strange young person; but she rose and shook her head at the question of playing.

“I am no pianist,” she said. “I have never played anything but my own accompaniments. Miss Higginson plays magnificently. I should never dare to attempt the piano where she is. I only learnt to play after I was grown up.”

“What kind of music does Miss Higginson prefer?” asked Brandon.

“Oh, all the great masters — Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Chopin—and she extemporises exquisitely. The piano to her is a living creature, her most intimate friend. She and her piano talk to each other for hours together. I can only sit in a corner, at my needlework, and wonder at her. She is far away from me—in another world.”

“Yes; my little girl has a genius for music,” said Sir Joseph, awakened at once by the cessation of song. “And Marie has a fine voice and a pretty taste, hasn’t she, Mountford?”

Brandon said all that was proper and complimentary about Miss Arnold's singing, and felt infinitely relieved by the worthy Baronet's return to consciousness and conversation.

"I hope I may have the pleasure of hearing Miss Higginson play before I leave Ellerslie," he said, presently. "Does she return soon?"

"That depends upon her doctor. She is not to leave Hastings without his permission."

"You must miss her sadly."

"I should be lost without her if it wasn't for Marie. She takes care of me. She is like a second daughter to me. By the way, Marie, Mr. Urquhart is coming in a day or two. Don't forget to tell Mrs. Morison to have his room ready."

Marie's cheek and brow crimsoned, and the dark, strongly arched brows contracted in a frown.

"What brings Mr. Urquhart here again so soon?"

"The same attraction that brings Mr.

Mountford—my salmon-river. He will be company for you, Mountford,” added Sir Joseph, to his guest. “Urquhart’s brother, Lord Penrith, is a neighbour of mine. Urquhart lost his wife only a year ago—married badly, a poor parson’s daughter—and he contrives to spend a good deal of his life at Killander Castle. It suits him uncommonly well, you understand ; for he has my shooting and fishing as well as his brother’s.”

Brandon watched Marie Arnold’s face while Sir Joseph was talking, and wondered at the angry and troubled look which clouded a countenance that had been gay and smiling a few minutes before. There must be some strong reason for her dislike of Mr. Urquhart, he told himself ; and he became more interested in the girl’s character and history from this moment.

CHAPTER V.

IF IT COULD HAVE BEEN.

HUBERT URQUHART arrived three days after Mountford's establishment at Ellerslie, by which time the stranger had made himself at home in his new surroundings, had explored gardens and park under Marie's guidance, had seen a coal mine and an iron mine, had become very good friends with Sir Joseph, and had won the approval of Sir Joseph's head keeper. Urquhart's arrival was no more welcome to Brandon than it was to Marie Arnold. The old acquaintance was civil to the new-comer, but evidently displeased at finding a stranger domesticated at Ellerslie, the more so perhaps when informed that the stranger was a connection of

Sir Joseph's, and had a legitimate claim upon his hospitality.

Mr. Urquhart was thirty-four years of age, had been in a cavalry regiment, and had sold out just before the abolition of purchase in the army. He had married badly, as Sir Joseph told Brandon; had married in haste and repented with equal celerity. He had not been unkind to his wife, but he had been neglectful, and even his battered conscience had felt some remorseful twinges when the poor faded prettiness, which had once been so purely pink and white, faded out of life altogether, suddenly, after the birth of a second baby, which only survived the mother by a fortnight. She died at the Yorkshire parsonage in which the greater part of her life had been spent, and where her orphan daughter, Coralie, was now being cared for by a widowed grandfather and two spinster aunts.

Those remorseful pangs of conscience, for a wife from whose death-bed he had been absent,

did not long discompose the gentlemanlike equanimity which was a mark of race in Hubert Urquhart. He went back to his patrimonial home a free man, and took his ease in the house of his elder brother, Lord Penrith, still a bachelor, and burdened with an estate richer in acreage and historical interest than in revenue. The Penriths had been poor for three generations, and were getting poorer as land declined in value. Lord Penrith had just missed three great heiresses, having tried his hardest for all three, and having been near acceptance with each. There was a something wanting in his nature where women are concerned. That cold hardness of the Urquhart character might have subjugated some meek, sentimental girl, whose dream of love is of the upward-looking, worshipping affection—the love of the brooks for the moon—but heiresses have got beyond that kind of sentimentalism. They require to be worshipped themselves; and the more exacting among them require sincerity in the worshipper.

Lord Penrith had never been able even to seem sincere, and in each case he found finally that he had but made the running for some hot-headed, impetuous lover, who snatched the prize from his very arms in a whirlwind of eloquent passion.

Crushed by his third disappointment, Penrith had retired to his Cumbrian castle, and into himself, and already bore the reputation of a misanthrope and a woman-hater. He had given up every hope of restoring the fortunes of his race by a wealthy alliance. The fashion of Anglo-American marriages, the strictly modern blend of the feudal castle and the Transatlantic oil-well was hardly known at that date, and Lord Penrith, having failed to attach himself to English coin in the possession of English beauty, retired to his tent, like Achilles, and sulked there, content to shoot and fish and hunt and farm, remote from society and woman's wiles. He was Hubert Urquhart's senior by five years, a man of graver character, but of the same

hardness of fibre. Hubert had a kind of surface pleasantness which served his turn in society, and which made him more popular than his elder brother.

The Urquharts were a handsome race,—always allowing for that hardness of expression which was a family characteristic. Penrith and his brother were both tall, strongly built yet slender, with commanding carriage, and a thoroughbred delicacy of hand and foot. Both had the Scottish type of features and complexion, long, thin noses, thin lips, cold grey eyes, and auburn hair, and they were men who looked their best in Highland clothes, which made up by the picturesque for what was wanting to the wearers in personal charm.

Hubert Urquhart's keen grey eye scanned Brandon from head to foot, weighed him in the balance, and found him wanting—as a man of the world.

“I am told you have spent half your life in Africa, Mr. Mountford,” he said in a pause of

their sport, as they sat on the river-bank discussing a snack of bread and cheese and a bottle of Bass.

“Not quite. My life has lasted twenty-eight years, of which five have been spent in Africa.”

“Why did you go?”

Brandon's brow clouded at the question.

“I had been ill, and my doctor told me to live in the open air.”

“You could have done that in Argyleshire or Connemara.”

“No doubt, but I preferred Matabeleland.”

“A curious fancy,” said Urquhart, with a slightly contemptuous air. “I have never yet been able to realise the motives of a man who runs away from civilisation, unless he is running away from debts and difficulties at the same time, which, of course, was not your case. And you really found the Crocodile and the Zambesi Rivers more attractive than the Rhine or the Arno?”

“Infinitely more attractive. I grant that the

European rivers have all the charm of association; that there are some names—Tiber, for instance—which act like a spell. But that untrodden world yonder has the more potent magic of freshness and mystery.”

“Ah, you hanker after the unexplored and the unknown. My ideal is a place like Monte Carlo, where there are good hotels, pretty women, and a *trente et quarante* table,—to say nothing of pigeon-shooting. I have never been further afield for pleasure than southern Italy, and I hope never to go. What do you think of old Higginson?”

“A splendid old man—plenty of grit, and plenty of heart.”

“A sturdy old Briton, ain’t he? A distinctly native production. The kind of man we all pretend to be proud of, and whom we all laugh at.”

“I have not yet discovered the ridiculous side of his character.”

“Ah, you are a connection, and you think it

a point of honour to take the good old bloke seriously. I am indebted to him for infinite hospitality. I like his house, his shooting, and his river, and I like him; but for all that I can't help seeing that he is a capital joke. His frank boastfulness, for instance—his missing aspirates—his prosy recapitulation of the various steps by which he mounted Fortune's ladder. The worst of such men is that they can take nothing for granted. Everything in their lives must be expatiated upon."

"I like his frankness, and I don't mind his bragging, which is a part of his frankness."

"Oh, come now, Mountford, hang frankness—call it frank egotism. Candour is only a synonym for want of manners. Your candid man goes about the world plaguing everybody with his own feelings and his own affairs. The first lesson a well-bred man learns is the art of self-suppression, and that the outside world doesn't care twopence about him. What

is your opinion of Sir Joseph's handsome niece—ward—whatever you like to call her ? ”

“ You have just told me that reticence is a sovereign merit in civilised man, and yet you question me about my opinions.”

“ Opinions are always interesting. Marie Arnold is a handsome woman. We are both men, and we are both mortal. We can hardly help admiring her.”

“ You have expressed an opinion that serves for both of us. There is nothing left for me to say.”

“ You think her handsome, then ? ” questioned Urquhart, with keen eyes bent upon his companion.

“ Of her type, most assuredly.”

“ But you don't care for the type, evidently ? ”

“ I confess that there is a little too much prodigality in colouring and in form for my ideal. That southern splendour dazzles me more than it attracts. The type I most admire is of a paler beauty. There is an ethereal Raffaellesque

fairness which is to my mind the perfection of female loveliness."

"You are thinking of your cousin, I fancy," said Urquhart, still keenly watchful of his companion's face.

"Of my cousin. You mean Miss Higginson, perhaps? I have never seen her, but her portrait as a child does certainly favour my typical loveliness—allowing for the disadvantages of that nondescript age, when face and form have lost the charm of infancy, without acquiring the grace of girlhood."

"How is it that you have never been here before?"

"There is no 'how' about the matter—no reason why I should have been here sooner, or why I should have come at all—except the stream yonder. My connection with Ellerslie is of the slightest. My father and Lady Lucy were a kind of distant cousins, and Miss Higginson and I are just one stage further apart on the family tree. If you look at the Mount-

ford pedigree you will find my name in an obscure bracket near the edge of the document, while Miss Higginson, as granddaughter of the present Lord Allandale, occupies a central position."

"Miss Higginson is a personage anywhere and everywhere—a great heiress and a great beauty—after your Raffaellesque type."

The beer-bottles were empty by this time, and the soothing digestive pipe was finished, so the two men went back to the river, and for the rest of the day were better occupied than in idle conversation. Perhaps Urquhart had asked all the questions he wanted to ask, yet he tramped back to Ellerslie House in a somewhat discontented mood, for being himself innately and constitutionally insincere, he found it difficult to credit anybody else with sincerity.

"Pretends not to admire her," he mused, as he and Brandon walked up the hill between four and five o'clock, after a disappointing day. "I never knew a man who did not depreciate

the woman he was in love with. They like to throw another man off the scent, even when there is no particular reason for concealment."

It was one of those halcyon days which April steals from May or June, and they found Sir Joseph taking tea on the terrace, with Marie ministering to his comforts, buttering his thin dry toast, and measuring out the precise amount of cream he liked in his cup. The old man was basking in the afternoon sunshine, basking also in the sense of well-being, of a life profitably spent, of a great fortune honourably acquired, of the power which wealth gives when that wealth is realised out of the thews and sinews of working men, and when a whole population depends for its bread upon one man. At a nod of Sir Joseph's head, those villages yonder, scattered on the bleak moorland, might be reduced to idleness and penury. He had been, upon the whole, a beneficent employer. He had never forgotten that he had once worked for his bread, or that his mother had risen at

five o'clock on winter mornings to go out washing; and his sympathy with working men and women had never been lessened by his own luxurious surroundings. He knew as well what they wanted now as he knew what he wanted fifty years ago when he was one of them. The link between him and his people had never been broken. When there were strikes and lock-outs over half England, Sir Joseph's peace was unthreatened. His men laughed Trade Unionists to scorn. They wanted no Socialist friends from Newcastle or Shields. They had the best friend they could have in Old Joe; and so long as Old Joe was above-ground they would work for him and trust in him. He had made it the study of his life to be in advance of his men's necessities, and to concede advantages unasked that were soon afterwards being fought for with murderous rancour in other districts. Little wonder, then, that Sir Joseph Higginson's influence was rooted deep in the hearts of his people. His young wife's brief residence at

Ellerslie had been a reign of beneficence, and it had been her daughter's delight to continue the good work her mother had begun; so the voice of the Socialist charmer, charm he never so wisely, was powerless to arouse evil-feeling among the men of Ellerslie.

The salmon-fishers were received with cordiality by Sir Joseph, and with a certain mute emotion by Marie Arnold, who blushed at their coming, blushed as she had never done when Urquhart came alone, he himself noted with sullen jealousy. There was evidently a flirtation on foot already between Brandon and her, and Brandon's indifference was only an assumption, Urquhart told himself, as he drew his chair to the tea-table and watched Marie while she filled the cups and ministered to the new arrivals. He marked her lowered eyelids, those full, firm eyelids which had a look of marble above their dark lashes; he noticed the tremulous uncertainty of her hands as they moved among the cups and saucers. Yes, this

new-comer had made a deeper impression upon her foolish little mind in three days than he, Urquhart, had made in all his lengthy visits, and with all his subtlest flatteries and most delicate attentions. He had hated Mountford from the outset as a dangerous interloper; and now he was assured that he had not hated him in vain.

Hubert Urquhart had fallen in love with Marie Arnold on his first visit to Ellerslie, a three months' widower, but he had been careful to give no indication of his feelings. He had been studiously courteous, and he had ventured on an occasional compliment; but he had gone no further, waiting to be sure of his ground before he declared himself.

From the beginning he had made up his mind that Marie Arnold was nearer and dearer to Sir Joseph than the old man had told the world. His casual way of talking of her, sometimes as the daughter of a man who had been killed in his service, sometimes as a kind

of adopted niece, did not deceive Mr. Urquhart. He saw that Sir Joseph was as proud of Marie's beauty and accomplishments as he was of Sibyl's more refined attractions, that his eyes turned as fondly upon the alien when the two girls stood beside his chair bidding him good night, as ever they turned upon his acknowledged daughter. Urquhart had no doubt that Marie too was his daughter—the issue of some intrigue which had lightened the cares of his work in the Belgian mining country, and it occurred to him that even an unacknowledged daughter of Sir Joseph Higginson would be no bad match for the impecunious scion of a noble house. He was cautious, however, and went to work deliberately, although he was deeper in love with Marie Arnold than he had ever been with any woman in his life. It may be that there was something in the warmth and quick impulse of her southern nature which charmed him by contrast with his own cold and sluggish temperament. Ice and fire could not have been more different,

but the ice trembled and melted at the touch of that fire, and the hard, battered man of the world owned himself the slave of this unsophisticated girl.

“*Festina lente*,” he said to himself. “I can’t afford to marry her unless there’s money in it.”

He had heard a good deal about a certain Andrew Orlebar, Sir Joseph’s factotum, secretary, and alter ego; and he fancied that this Orlebar would be the right man to put him on the right tack. Orlebar must know all about Marie’s origin, and Marie’s expectations. The only question was how much of that information Mr. Orlebar might be disposed to impart in answer to judicious pumping.

Heretofore Mr. Urquhart had been unlucky in finding Orlebar absent from Ellerslie, either watching his chief’s business in London, or on some Continental mission. He was a man who needed no more warning or preparation for a journey to Egypt or India than commoner men

require for a trip to Brighton or Paris. He lived, moved, and breathed only for his employer, had neither kith nor kin, tastes nor pleasures of his own—a colourless, faithful, stolid, unenjoying machine fashioned in the likeness of man.

This time Urquhart had taken care to be sure of Orlebar's presence at Ellerslie before he offered himself as a visitor; and here in the glow of the afternoon sunlight came this very Orlebar, shuffling along the terrace, faded, dusky, grey amidst all the wealth of colour in a garden unfolding its beauty to the spring. He made a discordant note in that harmony of brilliant hues, a patch of dirty grey which offended the eye. He brought his chief a packet of letters—the afternoon mail—and they two were soon sitting apart, with heads close together and brows bent, over the open letters, by the marble balustrade, and at the base of a marble Pan, which seemed to look down at them in grim derision of their money-grubbing instincts. What

did money matter to the great god Pan, the forest wildling, who had all the wealth of nature for his own?

Marie questioned the men about their day's sport, and Urquhart noticed how her glances turned shyly to Mountford, and dwelt on his face while he talked, and even lingered there when he was silent. Towards him, Urquhart, she had shown only avoidance; had made all pursuit of her difficult; had been openly scornful when he praised her beauty or seemed to hang entranced upon her singing—seemed only, since music was a missing sense with most of the Urquharts, and for him a barrel-organ in a London street playing the latest music-hall melody, or a military band in the park braying the last flashy waltz, realised all that music should be.

Marie sang her little French songs at Sir Joseph's bidding upon this evening just as she had sung on previous evenings, and Sir Joseph slept through the music as before; but Mount-

ford perceived a change in her manner. She was less at her ease than she had been when he and she had been practically alone. She was silent in the intervals of her singing, and she retired early.

When she was gone Sir Joseph challenged Mountford to a game of cribbage, in which the old man excelled; and Urquhart strolled off to the billiard-room in quest of Andrew Orlebar, who had dined with them, and had disappeared immediately after dinner, neither sharing the after-dinner claret nor the after-dinner cigars.

“Curious fellow, Orlebar,” explained the master of the house; “he neither smokes nor drinks. He has no vices; and I sometimes think he has no virtues. He is the nearest approach to a calculating-machine that a warm-blooded animal could attain to.”

“And remarkably useful to you, no doubt, Sir Joseph,” said Mountford.

“Invaluable. The human calculating-machine

is the rarest product of nature. Your average accountant is distracted by the burden of his own egotism, his passions, domestic anxieties, temptations, proclivities. My friend Orlebar is arithmetic incarnate."

Mr. Orlebar had a den of his own adjoining the billiard-room—by courtesy, "Mr. Orlebar's study;" in actual appearance, an accountant's office, a place of pigeon-holes, and ledgers, and dockets, and files, its most interesting literature a long row of Whitaker's Almanacks, sole record of the passing years. The room was conveniently situated for Sir Joseph, who was fond of billiards, and liked to run in and out of his secretary's den as occasion prompted.

Mr. Urquhart took down a cue, and amused himself with a few experimental shots, with his eye upon the half-open door of Orlebar's room. Yes, the grey old man was there. Urquhart heard the scratching of his pen. He went to the door and looked in at the bent shoulders

and iron-grey head, leaning over a page of foolscap.

“Can I tempt you to put down your pen and take up a cue, Mr. Orlebar?” he asked.

Orlebar looked at him quietly, neither surprise nor gratification expressed upon his blunt physiognomy.

“I don’t play billiards,” he said; “I sometimes mark. I rather like marking a good game.”

He drew a sheet of blotting-paper over a page of closely-ruled columns, filled with figures, and left his desk, as if ready for conversation.

“Don’t let me disturb you, if you don’t care to play.”

“I have finished my evening’s work,” answered Orlebar, “and I am going out for my evening constitutional.”

“What, you walk after dinner, do you?”

“Always, Mr. Urquhart, wet or fine. No machine will go on smoothly without oil—and

locomotion is the only oil I know of that will keep the human machine in good working order. I walk six miles per diem."

"Let me walk with you," said Urquhart, with a friendly air. "Sir Joseph and Mr. Mountford are at cards. I should like a walk."

"Won't it bore you, though, such a walk as I take, up and down the terrace, so many turns for a mile? It is not the kind of walk a young man like you would enjoy."

Urquhart looked at the dull, grey face before he answered. There was a lurking shrewdness under the surface stolidity of Mr. Orlebar's countenance which told him that any attempt to conceal his own motives would be worse than useless. It would damage his chances of getting any help in this quarter.

"I don't care where I walk as long as I keep moving," he said, "and I particularly want a little chat with you."

"Come along, then," said Orlebar, opening a glass door which gave on to the terrace;

and in the next minute he and Urquhart were walking side by side in the misty stillness of a mild April night. "You want to talk to me, you say. You want a tip for the Stock Exchange, no doubt. You've a fancy for some new venture, and you think Andrew Orlebar is up to the dead."

"My dear Mr. Orlebar, I am not a speculator, for the best of all reasons. I have never had any capital to invest."

"There are men who speculate without capital, but I am glad you are not one of those," said Orlebar. "They don't often last."

"The subject upon which I want to talk to you is one that touches me much nearer than any money question could."

"Then it must touch you very near."

"It does, for it is an affair of the heart."

"And you come to me for advice in a love-affair!" exclaimed Orlebar, with a dry laugh.

"That's the funniest idea I've heard of for

a long time. Do I look like a man to advise a lover how to win his mistress ? ”

“Frankly, you don’t,” said Urquhart, echoing his laugh, “but in my case you can give very valuable advice, since the lady I am in love with is a kind of ward of your chief’s.”

“Marie Arnold. You are in love with Marie, are you? Well, you might make a worse choice. She is a handsome young woman, she has a fine voice, she has been well brought up, and has good principles.”

“And she will not be without a dowry, I conclude.”

“Ah, then, you are not so deep in love as to leave money out of the question.”

“My good Mr. Orlebar, I am a man of the world. I made one foolish marriage—a very sweet girl, pure as an angel, but without a rap. I am too old to make a second blunder of the same kind. If I were a rich man I should be proud to marry Miss Arnold without a penny; but I have only a younger son’s portion,

and I have a daughter to maintain. Sir Joseph must naturally desire to find a husband for his ward."

"Why naturally?"

"Because her position in his household is anomalous, and must lead to complications, now that Miss Higginson is grown up."

"Why anomalous?"

"Oh, my dear Orlebar, you must see the difficulty of the case quite as clearly as I do," said Urquhart, growing familiar. "Here is a beautiful girl who is and yet is not a member of Sir Joseph's family. She dines with the housekeeper, she spends her evenings in the drawing-room. There is no avowed relationship, yet Sir Joseph is evidently as fond of her as of his daughter and heiress. Think of the difference between the positions of those two girls; and consider the bad feeling which that difference must awaken in poor Marie's mind, a year or so hence, unless she marries and takes her place in society on the strength

of that marriage. Who, with a grain of worldly knowledge, can doubt that her claim upon Sir Joseph is just as strong as Miss Higginson's?"

"You mean that she is neither more nor less than Sir Joseph's unacknowledged daughter," said Orlebar.

"That is my meaning—and my fixed conviction."

"So let it be, my dear sir," was the bland reply. "You know very nearly as much about Miss Arnold as I do. I was sent to a little mountain town in Provence to fetch the young lady, at Sir Joseph's bidding. Her mother had died rather suddenly, and she, poor child, was alone, and friendless, except for a few good-natured gossips, her dead mother's neighbours, too poor and too insignificant to be of much use to her. I brought her to London, and from London despatched her to Ellerslie, where she has lived ever since. Sir Joseph told me that her father was a clever engineer,

who was of great assistance to him in the working of an iron mine, and who was killed while in his service. For my own part I see nothing remarkable in the fact that a man in Sir Joseph's position should show kindness to the widow and orphan of so valuable a servant."

"That he should show kindness, no; but that he should introduce the engineer's daughter into his home and take her to his heart,—there I think you will own he oversteps the mark, and strains credulity. By the way, how old was Marie at the time of her father's death?"

"She was not born."

"A posthumous child! Was she born soon after her father's death?"

"I cannot oblige you with such minute details."

"I have no curiosity upon the point,—only as a man of the world, you must forgive me if I doubt your chief's account of the trans-

action. I am so fond of Marie that I should like to know all I can about her parentage ; in her interest rather than my own. I could love her no less had she been a beggar's brat. I don't want to entrap her into a marriage that would mean poverty,—but if Sir Joseph would make a respectable settlement—a settlement in accordance with his own large means——”

“You have not beaten about the bush with me, and I'll be frank with you, Mr. Urquhart,” said Orlebar, gravely. “You are right in supposing that Sir Joseph considers his ward's position somewhat anomalous—or rather that it may appear so when his daughter comes down to the full blaze of the society footlights, while Marie Arnold is left at the back of the stage. I believe I am justified in saying that he would like to see this young person married to a husband whom she could love, and he could approve. With such a husband he would be disposed to treat liberally upon the question of

settlements, and I have no doubt Miss Arnold's dowry might be something between twenty and fifty thousand pounds. You know, of course, that the larger sum would be as easy a matter to Sir Joseph as the smaller. It would be a question of his own inclination and judgment what amount he should give."

"Undoubtedly! And do you think he would favour my suit? Apart from the money question, I am not a bad match for a young lady in Miss Arnold's position. I belong to one of the oldest families in Cumberland, and I am heir presumptive to an earldom."

"Lord Penrith is still a young man, Mr. Urquhart."

"True; but he is a young man with an old man's habits and ideas; and I don't believe he will ever marry."

"That is a point in your favour, no doubt. But to be frank with you, I doubt if Sir Joseph would quite approve of your antecedents. His ward would have to be very much in love with

you in order to win her guardian's consent to the match."

Urquhart's brow contracted at the suggestion. He knew in his heart that Marie Arnold's present feeling for him was dislike rather than love ; and he knew that he would have a hard battle to fight before he could get her to be his advocate with Sir Joseph. His hope had been that Sir Joseph would adopt him as a suitor, and force his suit with Marie. He did not despair, however, having seen many cases in which love began with aversion.

"As for my antecedents," he replied, after a longish pause, "I don't fancy I have been wilder than most young men of family ; and having sown a few wild oats I am all the more likely to settle down as a respectable family man. If I could win such a wife as Miss Arnold I should have a spur to ambition, and might make my way in the political world. With Penrith's interest and Sir Joseph's I might be able to achieve a distinguished public position."

“The aspiration is at least creditable. The best advice I can give you is to win the lady. With her on your side there may be a chance of victory. Sir Joseph would do much to secure her happiness,” concluded Orlebar in the friendliest tone, and then within himself he said, “But unless I am vastly deceived in my estimate of his knowledge of character, he will never entrust her happiness to a foxy-haired gentleman of your particular type.”

While this conversation was being carried on in a perambulatory fashion on the terrace, where the sound of the sea came in with an undertone of monotonous melancholy, as if it were the great voice of Nature mourning the degeneracy of man, another conversation, of which Marie Arnold was the subject, was going on in the drawing-room.

Sir Joseph played his first two games with spirit and eagerness, but the third game had hardly begun when his attention flagged and his play became careless.

“What do you think of my adopted daughter?” he asked abruptly.

“I think her a very handsome young woman,” Mountford answered easily. “There could be hardly two opinions upon that point, and she seems to be as amiable as she is good-looking.”

“She is,” replied Sir Joseph, quickly. “There is no seeming in her case. She has lived a good many years under this roof, and no one has ever had occasion to find fault with her. She is a dear, good girl, the daughter of a man who was killed in my service. I deemed it my duty to look after her and her widowed mother, and I have never had cause to repent that I undertook the responsibility. She has lived in this house as Sibyl’s friend and companion, and she has never shown the slightest jealousy of my little girl’s advantages as an only daughter and heiress. I don’t want her to find out how great a difference the outside world can make between a great heiress and a young woman who is

practically a nobody. I should like to see Marie comfortably married before the end of this year : married to a man she can love, a man who shall be worthy of her love."

"There should be no difficulty in finding such a man in the wide circle of your acquaintance, Sir Joseph," said Brandon, gravely, without looking up from his cards.

He had an uncomfortable feeling that there was some serious intention in his host's discourse, an intention that involved himself.

"No, indeed. I know plenty of young men on their promotion, decent fellows enough, to whom a wife with twenty thousand or so for her dowry would be like a gift dropped from heaven. But I should like to find a husband of whose antecedents and surroundings I know more than I can know about a casual acquaintance of the West End or City, a man who comes of a good stock, and in whom honour and generous feeling are hereditary qualities. I believe in heredity, Mr. Mountford. My father

was a peasant, but he was an honest man, and he could trace his pedigree from many generations of honest, God-fearing men. We plebeians have our old races as well as you patricians."

"I have never doubted that. On the Allandale estate there are peasant families that were settled on the soil before the signing of the great Charter freed them from their heaviest burdens."

The game continued languidly, till Sir Joseph laid down his cards with a thoughtful sigh, took off his spectacles, and leant back in his chair.

"That girl doesn't like Urquhart," he said, abruptly. "I wonder whether you noticed the change in her manner to-night."

"Yes, Sir Joseph, I saw that Miss Arnold seemed hardly in her usual good spirits this evening. Has Mr. Urquhart made himself obnoxious to her in any way?"

"Not to my knowledge. It is only a woman-

ish prejudice for which she can give no reason. I sounded her about him the last time he was here. She doesn't like him; doesn't know why; objects to the colour of his hair or the shape of his nose, perhaps. I didn't argue the matter with her, and I shouldn't have had him here again if he hadn't offered himself. It wouldn't have been neighbourly to say no—and here he is. However, if she had liked him ever so well I should have felt very doubtful about letting her marry him. I have heard some disagreeable stories about his conduct in relation to women and his gambling propensities."

Brandon was silent. He had not been favourably impressed by Lord Penrith's younger brother, but he did not want to injure that gentleman's chances with Marie Arnold, having made up his mind that Urquhart was honestly in love with her.

Sir Joseph had questioned him before to-night about his own plans for the future—the scheme

of life which he had made for himself—and Brandon had told his host that he meant to go back to Africa. His future lay there, in a wandering life. He had no other ambition—no other desire. The old world of civilisation could offer him nothing in exchange for the limitless horizons of the desert, and the victories of the practised hunter.

Sir Joseph had argued against the foolishness of this idea, and now to-night he took up the thread of a former conversation.

“I can conceive no greater waste of life than to tramp about a sandy wilderness and shoot lions, with occasional intervals of malarial fever,” he said.

“The life suits me as no other life could,” replied Brandon.

“But have you no lode-star in all civilised Europe—no tie to bind you to your own country? Have you never been in love, or have you given your English heart to a blackamoor?”

“ Since my boyish passion for my tutor’s daughter, a buxom young woman of nine-and-twenty, whom I adored when I wore Eton collars, and to whom I wrote six-page love-letters every week while I was at the University, I have been heart-whole,” replied Brandon, with perfect frankness. “ Nor does my passion for the land of the Zambesi extend to her living products in the shape of black beauty. I have hitherto been adamant to the charms of the Hottentot Venus.”

“ And you are free—free to fall in love with a handsome woman and to marry her ? ”

“ No, Sir Joseph, I am not free to marry, and I shall never marry.”

“ You are not free ! Do you mean to tell me that you entangled yourself by a foolish marriage while you were still at the University—married the young woman of nine-and-twenty, your tutor’s daughter ? ”

“ My tutor’s daughter was far too wise to reciprocate my boyish flame. She married

one of the senior masters, and is now on the high road to become wife of a bishop."

"Yet you say you are not free to marry?"

"There are reasons in my family history which should forbid marriage in my case, Sir Joseph," Brandon answered, gravely.

And then, as in a vision of the night, there came back upon the old man a fair young face turned to him in a sunlit room, a sad pale face, streaming with tears, and a gentle voice telling him a cruel story of marriage and motherhood ending in lunacy. Yes; this young man's mother went out of her mind soon after his birth, and there was a strain of madness in his blood. It was only right that he should live and die unmarried; and yet—but for this cruel bar—what an excellent husband he would have made for Marie.

Sir Joseph believed in himself as a judge of character, and he had formed a high opinion of Brandon Mountford's rectitude and good-feeling. And then he would have liked to have shown

kindness to the son of that man whom Lucy Mountford had loved, with a girl's innocent fancy, before she had seen the face of her low-born husband.

CHAPTER VI.

URQUHART CONSIDERS HIMSELF ILL-USED.

THAT suggestion of a possible marriage had stirred the waters of Marah in Brandon Mountford's memory. In every man's mind there is some Marah-pool which needs but a breath to disturb its bitter waters. With him the pool lay still and deep, yet he had an ever-present consciousness that it was there, a silent sorrow, which made his life different from the lives of other young men.

The fear of hereditary madness was the shadow that wrapped him round, and set him apart from men of his own age and circumstances, and hemmed him in with considerations which but rarely block a young man's pathway.

He looked back to-night in the solitude of his bedroom at Ellerslie, with the Tudor casements flung open to the soft spring night, and with all the waste of dark waters stretching far away to the distant silvery line that marked the horizon, touched with starlight. He looked back, as he often looked, and remembered his solitary childhood with his father's mother, old Mrs. Mountford, widow of General Mountford, who had fought in Arthur Wellesley's Indian campaign. He remembered that sad childhood, his father away in India, a captain of engineers under Sir Robert Napier, his grandmother a gloomy woman, evangelical, with pinched means, and a bitter sense of disappointment in her only son, despondent alike of the here and the hereafter. He remembered how when he was between fourteen and fifteen he had been sent from Wellington College to a house at Highgate to see his dying mother, the mother whose face he had never looked upon within his memory. A lucid, or semi-lucid interval, had marked the

ebbing away of life, and she had entreated to see her son, her baby, as she called him piteously.

The tall lad stood beside her bed, holding her wasted hand in his, looking down at her with tearful eyes ; and her first impulse had been to repudiate him.

“Who is this great boy?” she asked. “Mine was a little baby.”

The nurse tried to explain to her, but she did not listen to the explanation. She was looking at the boy’s face, and that told her more than anything the nurse could say about the years that had gone, and the changes made by time.

“Yes, yes, you are my boy,” she cried. “You have your father’s eyes. Where is he—where is my husband? Why doesn’t he come to me? He is very unkind—everybody is unkind.”

The lad stayed at the doctor’s house until all was over, and saw much of his mother in those

last few days—those weary closing hours of life, during which her mind was clearer, for brief intervals, than it had been in all the melancholy years since her son's birth. From doctor and nurses the son heard the history of those years of seclusion: her delusions, her fancies, the gleams of reason, the intervals of utter darkness. He saw the rooms in which she had lived, brightly furnished, home-like, comfortable even to luxury; and he understood how the absent husband had cared for his helpless wife, shirking no outlay that could ensure her well-being. He walked in the garden where she had walked, a spacious, old-fashioned garden, where the trees and shrubs and holly hedges had been growing for more than a century, and from which he could see the great city veiled in its smoke-curtain, vague, formless, monstrous. He walked there full of melancholy thoughts. The poor mother—all his life long a prisoner within those narrow bounds. No, not quite a prisoner. She had been allowed carriage-airings whenever

her condition permitted her being taken out of doors—carriage-airings in the custody of a mad-house nurse. She had been no better off than a State prisoner, at best. Years afterwards, when he saw the rocky island of St. Marguerite, and the fortress in which the masked prisoner endured long years of silent solitude, his thoughts went back to the bright little sitting-room at Highgate, and the sunny garden above the great smoke-bound city.

Those few days at Highgate made a crisis in Brandon Mountford's youth. He went back to Wellington an altered being, and masters and boys were alike struck with the change which his mother's death had made in him. It was odd that he should take his loss so deeply to heart, they said, since he had seen very little of his mother, a confirmed invalid. Over Brandon's life henceforth there brooded the shadow of a dark fate. He had talked to the doctor at Highgate, had pressed him closely upon the question of hereditary lunacy, had

inquired into the nature of his mother's malady, and had discovered that the mental flaw had first showed itself in the form of epilepsy, from which she had suffered as a young girl, but having, as it was supposed, entirely outlived the tendency to that terrible disease, she and her parents had kept that dark experience of her girlhood a secret from her husband and his family, an offence which old Mrs. Mountford had never forgiven.

Over him, too, hung that horror of possible epilepsy. He brooded on this possibility, and magnified its terrors as only youthful imagination can. He thought of himself as a creature apart from his fellows, marked with the signs of a revolting disease. When the fifth chapter of the Second Book of Kings was read, he compared himself with Naaman the leper; but, alas! the age of miraculous cures was past; there was no river in which he could wash and be free from the tendency that was in his blood, the ghastly heritage from his dead mother.

He exaggerated all his boyish ailments, saw in every headache an omen of impending evil. It may have been by reason of these gloomy thoughts, or it may have been because his fears were rightly grounded, and that the fatal tendency was latent in his constitution, that the dreaded evil happened. He was nearly eighteen years of age when the first attack occurred. The foul fiend of epilepsy seized upon him one evening in the school chapel, rent and tore him, and left him shattered and weakened, with a dull despair in his heart. Henceforth he knew himself doomed. One after another these horrible convulsive seizures would tear at brain and body, until reason would be wrecked in the struggle, and madness would close the scene. As it had been with his mother, so it would be with him. He gave up all idea of the army. He went to Cambridge, worked hard there, and in his three years of University life had only that milder form of epileptic seizure which French physicians call *le petit mal*, in contra-

distinction to the severe and convulsive type, or le grand mal. Sometimes, in his rooms, with his books open before him, or on the river, the sculls in his hands moving slowly with measured beat, there would be a sudden lapse of consciousness. He would go on rowing, perhaps, with a mechanical motion ; or the sculls would cease to work, and the boat would drift with the stream for a little way, the man sitting there lost to the world around him, knowing nothing till the slow awakening as from a trance, with the knowledge that he had lost himself, that in those few minutes reason and memory had gone. The consciousness of this malady darkened those days which should have been so full of pleasantness ; but he managed to take a very creditable degree, to the delight of his father, who enjoyed a year's furlough in his son's society, travelling through France and Italy. At Brindisi father and son parted, on board a P. and O. steamer, parted never to meet again on earth, for within a few months of

his return to India Major Mountford died of jungle fever, and Brandon was lord of himself and of a small income.

The first use he made of his independence was to shake off the trammels of civilisation, and to set his face towards the wilderness. His doctor at Cambridge had told him that his best chance of warding off future attacks, and of outgrowing his malady, would be found in a free, adventurous life—sport, travel—under God's open sky. Much learning was a thing for him to avoid; nor would he be wise in going to the Bar, or in taking up medicine as a profession. He stayed at Cambridge and worked for his degree, only to gratify his father. He had no ambition of his own in association with the civilised world. If he was to go through life torn by devils, let the tormentors come upon him in the desert, where there would be none to see him in his agony, or at least no one whose scornful pity could smite him to the quick.

His life in the wilderness had been on the whole a happy life. His love of sport and adventure had grown and strengthened with the growth of his skill as a marksman and his acumen as an explorer. Not often had his hereditary malady overtaken him in the midst of his wanderings, but he had not been altogether free from such visitations, and he knew that the fatal tendency was still unconquered, an enemy kept at bay, for the most part, but not beaten.

What assurance had he that epilepsy might not sooner or later develop into dementia, as in the case of his mother?

Sir Joseph had not even hinted at his idea of Mr. Mountford as a husband for Marie; so there had been no harm done, thought the old man, as he reflected upon last night's conversation with his guest, while he took his morning walk on the terrace, before the nine o'clock breakfast. Brandon had started for the river some hours before, having risen at dawn; but

he and the keeper had gone down to the stream alone, Urquhart pleading a headache as a reason for staying indoors.

Marie Arnold appeared on the terrace, looking bright and fresh in her pink cotton frock and black silk apron, soon after eight, and joined Sir Joseph in his walk.

"A long letter from Sibyl," said the old man. "She is coming back early next week. Her cough has quite gone, and she is pining for home. You'll be glad to have her back again, won't you, Marie?"

"Very glad. Ellerslie is not Ellerslie without her."

"And about this time next year she will be getting herself ready for the first May Drawing-room, and then good-bye Ellerslie, and good-bye girlhood," said Sir Joseph with a sigh. "She will be swallowed up alive in the fashionable whirlpool, and you and I will lose our hold upon her."

"I'm not afraid of that, Sir Joseph. I don't

think anything the world can do will ever change her."

"Well, perhaps you are right. Her mother passed through the ordeal unchanged. She was in the world, but never of it. She was like that young woman old John Evelyn was so fond of, who went dancing through the fiery furnace of Court life, play-acting and singing, and waiting upon the Queen, and talking to the King, in a society where half the women were—unmentionable, and yet remained a saint to the last. Ah me! Sweet Mrs. Godolphin died in the bloom of her youth and beauty, like my dear wife. Well, Marie, we must reconcile ourselves to the inevitable. Sibyl's schoolroom days are over, and you are no longer a young girl. You must marry, my dear; we must find a good husband for you."

"Please don't anticipate Fate, Sir Joseph," said Marie, with a little nervous laugh, and a very vivid blush. "If Providence means me to marry, the husband will appear in due time

—and in the meanwhile I shall be quite content to live my own quiet life here, with old Mrs. Morison, while you and Sibyl are in London.”

“And you will not think yourself hardly used—you won’t think it hard that Sibyl should have all the pleasures the great world can give while you are buried in this dull country home?”

“What right have I to envy Sibyl her life? I ought to feel nothing but gratitude for your goodness to my mother and me. If you had made me a servant I ought to have been contented.”

“Don’t, Marie, don’t! You pain me when you talk like that. I want you to be happy, independent, assured of a bright future. I want you to feel that you have a claim upon me, a strong claim—that you are as much to me as an orphan niece could be—more than a niece—almost as much as a daughter,” added Sir Joseph, his eyes dim with tears.

“You are all goodness to me. I have had more affection from you than I ever had from my mother, and Sibyl has been all a sister could be. Do you think I am going to complain because her lot is cast in the great world and mine out of it?”

“You are a good girl, and your lot may be happier than hers perhaps. Who can tell?”

Life went on very quietly at Ellerslie after this conversation between Sir Joseph and his adopted daughter, but that idea of finding a husband for Marie Arnold was still uppermost in his mind, and he was startled when Hubert Urquhart came to him in his study two days later and avowed his affection for Miss Arnold, an affection which he only waited Sir Joseph's consent to declare to the young lady.

“What! Have you said nothing to Marie about your feelings?” asked Sir Joseph.

“Nothing definite. I may have hinted at the state of the case. It has been hardly

possible for me to be in her society, and not let her see that I adore her."

"And how has she taken your hints, or your adoration?"

"She is an enigma to me, Sir Joseph. Yet I can but think if I had your approval—if you showed yourself really in favour of our marriage—she would not look unkindly upon me."

"Oh, you think she would not object if I urged your suit. Well, Mr. Urquhart, I'll be frank with you, and confess that you are about the last man I would choose as a husband for my adopted daughter. I may as well call her my adopted daughter, for I have all a father's affection for her."

"I am assured of that, Sir Joseph," said Urquhart; "but I am at a loss to understand your objection to me as a match for a young lady who, I am informed, is the daughter of a mechanic, and who therefore would make some advance in the social scale if she became the wife of an earl's younger son."

“‘Kind hearts are more than coronets,’ Mr. Urquhart. Your lineage is unobjectionable ; but I cannot say as much for your character or antecedents.”

“I may have gone the pace a little,” admitted Urquhart ; “but I have sown my wild oats.”

“It is not your wild oats I am thinking about, so much as the character of the sower,” answered Sir Joseph, gravely. “I have heard stories of your unkindness and neglect as a husband, Mr. Urquhart. Forgive me if I say that you have not a good character from your last place. I have been told that your wife died of a broken heart.”

“Then you have been told lies, Sir Joseph. Society seldom forgives a man who marries out of its ranks. I married a country parson’s penniless daughter ; and any unhappiness there may have been in her life was the result of circumstances over which I had no control. Were I to marry your adopted daughter I

conclude you would make a settlement which would secure her from the pinch of poverty, and which might help me to carve out a career for myself, either in politics or at the Bar."

"I would do much for a man she could love, and whom I could trust," replied Sir Joseph, gravely. "No question of money should stand between her and happiness. But, to be frank with you once more, you are by no means the man I would choose."

"I understand," said Urquhart, pale with anger, yet trying to be courteous. "You have made your choice already, perhaps? Mr. Mountford is the man you would prefer."

"Mr. Mountford is out of the question. He is a bachelor by inclination, and is bent upon a roving life in South Africa."

"Perhaps, Sir Joseph, after your frank depreciation of my character—I had better pack my portmanteau and leave the salmon to more favoured anglers. I have no right to inflict an unwelcome guest upon your family circle."

“Don’t talk nonsense, man. I may object to you as a husband for an impulsive, inexperienced girl—but that’s no reason why I should turn you out of doors. Stop as long as you like; only give Marie no more hints of your adoration. I have an idea that she is tolerably heart-whole, so far as you are concerned.”

Urquhart did not order the packing of his portmanteau. The salmon river was very attractive at this season, and it would not have suited his plans to leave Ellerslie, above all to leave Brandon Mountford master of the situation; for let Sir Joseph say what he would, Urquhart thought that Mountford’s pretensions would be favoured. Mountford’s family was as good as his, Urquhart’s; and Mountford’s antecedents offered no ugly blots to the inquiring eye. He had done well at the University. He had never made himself notorious by riotous living or debt. He had won renown as a fine shot and a sagacious explorer, and had published a record of his travels which had been praised

by the critics and appreciated by the public. In such a man as this Urquhart saw a dangerous rival. He saw, too, that Marie was interested in Mountford, and that it needed but some show of sympathy on his part to win her heart. Here, however, he was puzzled. Mountford seemed careless of charms which kindled Urquhart's warmest feelings. Was this coldness simulated, the mask of some deep design; or was the man really indifferent? Urquhart watched him closely, and could surprise no touch of tenderness amidst his unvarying courtesy; yet his own natural bent towards dissimulation inclined him to believe that Mountford was masking his batteries. There are some women who care only for the unattainable; and it might be that Marie thought all the more of Mountford because she had been unable to subjugate him. Urquhart had tried the other plan and had failed ignominiously.

Mountford had been nearly three weeks at Ellerslie, and seemed to have interwoven him-

self into the family life. Sir Joseph had taken a cordial liking for him, and it was the old man's hearty kindness which induced him to protract his visit much beyond his original intention.

"I don't know what we shall do without you when you leave us," said Sir Joseph. "We shall miss him sadly when he goes, shan't we, Marie?"

He did not see Marie Arnold's vivid blush, as she bent over the newspaper she had been reading, and he thought her answer was cold and careless. And then he remembered Brandon's determination to remain unmarried—a resolve that was perhaps over scrupulous, since his mother's malady might have bequeathed no fatal taint to him,—and he thought it a merciful dispensation that Marie Arnold should be careless and indifferent.

It was after seven o'clock when Mountford came home that evening. He had been for a

long and lonely ramble over the moors, glad to escape from Urquhart's society, even at the sacrifice of sport. Urquhart's conversation was the essence of worldly wisdom, of the streets streety; and a man who has spent his happiest years in the lonely places of the earth, and has communed with God and Nature under tropical stars, does not find much salt or savour in the petty gossip of clubs, or the intrigues and money troubles of men about town.

"I never knew such a fellow for not being interested in things that interest other men," said Urquhart discontentedly, when one of his choicest anecdotes had fallen flat. "I don't believe you care even for the turf."

"Not a jot," answered Brandon. "I admire a race-horse because he is the perfection of blood and speed, not because he can win a cup."

"Your indifference makes you very bad company," grumbled Urquhart. "We can't all shoot lions."

To-day Brandon had bathed his brain and

senses in solitude, and he felt all the better for the long ramble in the wild bleak country. He had seen Killander Castle afar off, tall and grey above the ridge of the moor, and he had wondered idly whether he would ever see it nearer, and what kind of a man its owner, Urquhart's elder brother, might be. And now in the fading light he walked up the hill, and by the winding shrubberied road that led to Ellerslie House. A carriage was driving a little way in front of him as he passed the lodge-gate. It disappeared at the first turn of the road, and he thought no more of it, until he saw it standing before the porch, while a footman busied himself in carrying various articles of luggage, handbags, books, umbrellas, and such small deer, into the hall.

From the hall came a sound of voices, Sir Joseph's strong baritone, and a girlish voice which was like music, so low and sweetly toned. Could it be the daughter of the house? Brandon went into the hall feeling shyer than he had

ever been in his life before. In those last days of confidential intercourse in Italy, when the father and son had talked together as man and man, Major Mountford had told his son that pathetic story of a hopeless love, struggled against valiantly, and never revealed. The thought that he was going to see the daughter of the woman his father had loved thrilled him strangely. He had been told that Sibyl was like her mother, and it was with a feeling almost of awe that he approached the girl of eighteen.

He remembered an old photograph, grey and faded, a poor little photograph taken on the beach at Bognor by an itinerant photographer—the portrait of a girl in a broad-brimmed hat and an old-fashioned frock, but with oh, so sweet and delicate a countenance—features so refined in their chiselling, such lovely lines of chin and throat, and such a slender, graceful figure! His father had taken that poor little photograph from his despatch-box. It was on

glass, and it had accompanied him all over India without coming to grief; and from the shadow-land of death and vanished years the young face had looked at Brandon dimly, like a ghost.

Yes, there were the same features, the same gracious lines, the same soft depth in the dark grey eyes that were looking at him now.

“Hullo, Mountford,” cried Sir Joseph, gaily; “the master of the house has come home. No more lax behaviour now! We shall have to mind our manners. Come and be introduced to my tyrant.”

Sibyl held out her hand to him in the frankest, friendliest way.

“I am ever so much obliged to you for helping to keep father in good spirits,” she said.

CHAPTER VII.

DREAMING AND WAKING.

LIFE at Ellerslie took a new colour for Brandon Mountford after that day. It had been pleasant, easy, unconventional from the beginning. He had felt the cordiality of Sir Joseph's welcome, the assurance that his presence gave pleasure to his host—but these things made an every-day happiness, and there was nothing wonderful or dream-like in a well-found country house, a fine salmon river, and a cheery old man who had begun his ascent to Fortune's Temple on the lowest rung of the ladder.

Sibyl's coming had changed the country house into an enchanted palace, the wind-blown terrace and lawns and shrubberies overlooking

the bleak Irish Sea into an earthly paradise. Her coming had changed life into a lovely dream. Her light figure moving to and fro on the rough banks of the river transformed that stream into a magical watercourse leading to an unexplored Eden. When a boating expedition was proposed one day he almost expected to find the boat drifting into the azure light of caverns as blue as the vast blue vault at Capri. He expected anything wonderful and abnormal rather than the rude, grey hills and the barren moorland.

In the beginning he surrendered himself blindly to the enchantment of this fair girl's society. He knew that he could never think of himself, or be thought of by Sir Joseph, as a possible husband for this heiress of mines and millions. Sir Joseph had frankly stated his ambitious hopes for his daughter.

"She must marry a peer, my dear Mountford," he said. "I want her to go back into the great world which her mother left when she

stooped to marry me. I want to see her a Countess, before I die. She is pretty enough, and she will be rich enough to be a Duchess—if there were an eligible Duke. I won't marry her to a fortune-seeker or a profligate, Mountford. I may be ambitious, but I won't sacrifice my girl's happiness, even to make her a great lady."

All this had been said more than once before Sibyl's return, and all this Mountford had accepted as inevitable—a decree of destiny, since Sir Joseph was the kind of man to carry out his own ideas to the letter, and it would be hard if among the bachelor Peers of Great Britain a worthy as well as a titled husband could not be found for his heiress. Mountford knew himself out of the running.

"Were I a Duke, and the inheritor of a couple of shires, I should be just as ineligible as I am now," he thought. "Nothing would ever induce me to link my life with a dearer life, and blight the heart that loved me."

Having thus made up his mind about himself—having set himself resolutely on the side of the celibates—Brandon Mountford made the mistake which men are apt to make in such circumstances. He was too secure of himself. He thought that he might reckon in advance of the Greybeard, Time, and think of himself as a middle-aged unimpressionable misogynist, while he was still in the very morning of life, much fresher in heart and brain than the majority of young men, since he had never blunted his feelings in the mill-round of youthful dissipations—had not wasted the first fervent love of boyhood upon the syrens and sylphs of the music-halls or the dancing-club—had not been spoiled or wearied by the vacuity and parrot-speech of the modish young lady, who is by way of being sporting or fast.

To Brandon Mountford an English girl in the morning of her youth and the freshness of her beauty was almost a new creation. Had Aphrodite herself met him in some cavern of

that bleak shore, in the half light of daybreak, she could not have seemed more enchanting than Sibyl in the grace and purity of her unspoiled girlhood. He yielded unresistingly to the charm of her presence, accepted her friendly advances, telling her lightly that she was to think of him as a newly discovered poor relation, something of the nature of an uncle.

“You might as well call me uncle, Miss Higginson,” he said one day, when he was assisting Sibyl and Marie not to catch salmon.

They had taken a good many lessons in the art of throwing a fly, but had not yet achieved the distinction of a bite.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that,” Sibyl answered, decisively; “you are much too young for an uncle. I’ll call you cousin, if you like, though perhaps even that would sound foolish. But we are a kind of cousins, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are cousins—in the third degree.”

“I’m glad of that. I like to know that I am related to you. Father likes you so much,

quite as well as if you were his nephew. Please call me Sibyl in future. Miss Higginson is dreadfully formal, and it is such an ugly name."

It was agreed therefore that they were to call each other Brandon and Sibyl.

"We are actually cousins," Sibyl explained, the first time she uttered the visitor's Christian name in her father's hearing, "so it would be absurd to be mistering and missing each other."

The speech was so frankly spoken that Sir Joseph took no alarm at the idea. He, too, had accepted Brandon Mountford as a poor relation, a harmless bachelor cousin. He had met dozens of such young men in society; young men as harmless, and often as necessary, by reason of their helpfulness in all the minor details of domestic life, as the often-quoted cat. He had no idea that such an existence could menace his dearest hopes.

The time came, too soon for Brandon's peace, after ten or twelve days of unalloyed bliss, when

the young man knew and felt his own peril. He knew that he loved Sibyl with the love that means the happiness or misery of a lifetime—or, at least, of all life's best and brightest years. There may be healing for such a wound, but it is a cure so gradual and so tardy that the convalescent hardly knows whether the passing years have conquered his passion or worn out his heart.

He knew that he loved her—knew that his delight in her society was something stronger and deeper than a man's pleasure in the company of a lovely and fascinating girl—knew that the slightest touch of her hand thrilled him, that the sound of her voice, heard casually from the garden while he was writing a letter by the open window of his own room, would set his heart beating and make him write nonsense.

They had been rarely alone together; they had only talked to each other in the lightest strains upon the most casual subjects. Marie was always with them, walking by sea or moor,

lounging on the terrace, lingering over the friendly tea table, visiting the stables, driving, riding, Marie was as inevitable as Sibyl's shadow. Brandon might have thought that this perpetual companionship on Miss Arnold's part was in obedience to orders from Sir Joseph; but Sir Joseph's whole way of life was too unsophisticated to allow of such an idea. No, Sir Joseph trusted his guest, and it was for his guest to prove worthy of the confidence that had been so freely given. Brandon knew that he had been received and trusted on the strength of his race, warranted honourable, as it were, because of the good blood that flowed in his veins, the gentleman's heritage of honour and self-respect. Not for all that this earth can give of happiness would he have proved himself unworthy of the good man's confidence.

Thinking over that "shadowing" of Sibyl by Marie Arnold, he accounted for it to his own satisfaction as a sign of the elder girl's jealous attachment to her adopted sister. It must be

jealousy, and only jealousy, which made Marie dog their footsteps, and intrude her own personality upon every conversation, every small scheme of amusement. There were times when he could see that even Sibyl was somewhat annoyed by the elder girl's obtrusiveness. They could talk of no subject in which Marie would not take her part, sometimes talking sheer nonsense, in her eagerness to usurp the conversation.

Whatever the feeling was which influenced this strong and passionate nature, it was a feeling that totally changed the girl's manner—and the change, in Brandon's opinion, was a change greatly for the worse. He could but compare the Marie Arnold of the present—vehement, excitable, dictatorial even—with the Marie Arnold of those quiet days before Sibyl's return. Then the dependant had been all gentleness, modest, retiring, given to thoughtful silence rather than overmuch speech. Now she was loquacious, irritable, capricious, chang-

ing without apparent reason from exaggerated gaiety to sullen gloom—resenting unintended slights, exacting, pettish.

To Brandon the change became hourly more mysterious, and more worrying.

“You know Miss Arnold better than I do,” he said to Urquhart one evening in the billiard-room, “and perhaps you can tell me if she is often as disagreeable as she was to-day during our river excursion?”

“In my sight Marie Arnold can never be disagreeable. She is simply the loveliest woman I know, and the most fascinating.”

“I did not know you were so ardent an admirer. She is handsome, unquestionably—in a certain style—and I can understand your admiring her. But I think you will admit that she has changed for the worse since Miss Higginson’s return.”

“Possibly. I dare say she feels her false position a little more keenly when Sibyl is at home.”

“You are pleased to talk of a false position—but really I don’t see where the falsehood comes in. Sir Joseph treats her with unwavering kindness.”

“Sir Joseph treats his collie dog with unwavering kindness; but do you suppose such a girl as Marie—conscious of the highest gifts a woman can possess—does not feel the difference between the acknowledged and the unacknowledged daughter—the heiress and the dependant?”

“I don’t think Miss Arnold—or any friend of Miss Arnold’s—has the right to jump at conclusions upon such a subject as that,” returned Brandon, with grave displeasure.

He liked, and even respected, Sir Joseph Higginson, and on that account alone was inclined to resent the insinuation that this girl, whose presence was an ostensible fact in the family circle, could be the offspring of some low intrigue. Much more did he dislike the idea that Sibyl’s companion and friend should

be a baseborn sister, the inheritor of a mother's shame.

“Perhaps, as Sir Joseph is a very good fellow, and a millionaire, the wisest course for all of us is to imagine his character and antecedents stainless,” Urquhart retorted, with an open sneer. “For my part I am inclined to think him human, and that his affection for Marie Arnold has its root in an unforgotten love of his youth. I don't believe in abstract benevolence—or adopted nieces.”

Suddenly, swiftly it was borne in upon Brandon Mountford that this Paradise along whose sunlit paths he had been wandering, lost in a dream of unquestioning bliss—was a Paradise from which he must flee; and that, once having left that Eden, those good angels, Self-respect and Honour, standing with flaming swords on either side of the gate, would forbid his return. He had been trusted in that household—he had been warned by implication

against any attempt to win Sibyl Higginson's heart: and now he shrank appalled, bewildered, yet overjoyed, at the thought that the trusting girlish heart was almost won.

Yes, albeit they were so rarely together and alone, even for a few minutes, he had seen the signs of a growing interest in him and his life. He had seen the fair young face steeped in those sudden overwhelming blushes which tell of growing love. He had seen Sibyl start at his footstep—beam with gladness at his approach. He had seen her intense interest in those stories of his travels which he had told casually at first, and with a diffident apprehension of becoming a bore, but which both Sibyl and Marie had urged him to enlarge upon, and to repeat not once, but several times—stories of lions—stories of savage foes—stories of fever—stories of tricksters and card-sharpers at Port Natal—stories of buffaloes lost or dead—of extinguished camp fires—there was no detail of his adventurous wanderings in which those two listeners were not interested.

“I feel like a modern Othello with a pair of Desdemonas,” he said lightly, one afternoon as he was sculling lazily with the current, while Sibyl and Marie sat in the stern of the skiff, Sibyl holding the rudder-lines, and then he quoted, almost automatically—

“She loved me for the dangers I had pass’d ;
And I loved her, that she did pity them.”

“Oh, Sibyl,” he cried, as the nose of the boat swung suddenly round, “what a jerk! Is that your idea of steering?”

“I—I—beg your pardon, Brandon. I thought that barge was coming towards us.”

“That barge” was hugging the furthestmost shore, about a quarter of a mile away. Brandon glanced at Marie, and was surprised at the angry light in the large dark eyes; surprised at the searching gaze which the elder girl fixed upon Sibyl’s drooping eyelids and blushing cheeks.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE PINE WOOD.

BRANDON MOUNTFORD had talked of leaving Ellerslie several times before his final resolution to fly from danger ; but on each occasion Sir Joseph had pressed him to stay.

“You don’t want to be in London, Mountford,” he said. “You are not a man about town like Urquhart. London can get on without you, even though the season has begun. Urquhart tells me he must be in town before the twentieth. You may as well stop till then. You two fellows are company for each other, and I like to see young people about my house.”

And on each occasion Brandon had weakly

yielded, believing that if sadness should be the bitter after-fruit of joy the sadness would be for himself alone, and the girl he loved in secret would go on her way, happy and heart-whole, to gladden some luckier life than his.

But now it had been made clear to him, by casual looks and tones, and innocent girlish emotions, that his love was returned—and there was no choice for him as a man of honour. He must go. It was not a question of ways and means. Had there been no barrier but his poverty between the heiress and himself, he would have hazarded being thought a fortune-hunter, and would have risked a rough refusal from Sir Joseph. He would at least have pleaded his own cause, offered the devotion of an honourable well-born man, and taken his chance with the father. But between him and the woman he loved, there stood a hideous spectre,—the shadow that walketh at noon-day—the terror of a disease whose lightest aspect would chill and frighten that tender womanly

heart, and whose fiercer phases might bring disgust as well as fear to the mind which now associated him with only noble and gracious things.

Horrible, thrice horrible, that the girl he loved should ever look upon him in the clutch of those devils whose grip he had once felt, rending and tearing him. A year of cloudless wedded life could not obliterate one moment of that grisly horror, when the face she loved would be convulsed and changed, and the lips she had kissed would be disfigured with foam and blood.

No, love and marriage, the natural lot of other men, from the peer to the ploughman, were not for Brandon Mountford. Fate had given him good looks, a keen intelligence, a fine frame,—but Fate had laid upon him the burden of hereditary disease, and he must bear his burden as became a man and a gentleman. He must not let an innocent and loving girl wither under the blight that lay upon him.

Once during those happy days at Ellerslie,

just when he was beginning to realise the fact that his love was returned, and was beginning to foreshadow the sorrow of parting, he was reminded of his misery by an attack of "*le petit mal*." Sitting in the sunlit garden watching Marie and Sibyl playing tennis, two supple flying forms, in gowns whose whiteness flashed in the sunshine, the cloud came over him. He sat with fixed unseeing eyes, knowing nothing, till he heard a clock striking the hour, and awakening as from a dull and heavy sleep, he saw that the two girls had left the tennis court, that the net had been taken down, and he was sitting alone. That attack, slight and harmless though it was, roused Mountford to immediate action. Finding it very difficult to resist Sir Joseph's hospitable urgency, strengthened as it was by his own unwillingness to depart, Mountford made all his preparations for departure quietly one morning, packed portmanteau and fishing tackle without asking help from anybody, with all the handiness of a traveller

accustomed to roughing it in an uncivilised country. He had made up his mind irrevocably. He would leave Ellerslie next morning for London, spend the summer among his friends in or near London, and go back to Africa in the autumn. He meant to say nothing more about departure till he met Sir Joseph at breakfast on the following morning, when he could take a swift and sudden leave on the pretence of a summons from a kinsman, which excuse would not be a very great divergence from truth, as an old bachelor uncle, his mother's elder brother, who had made a fortune as a banker in Melbourne, had for some time been urgent in his invitations.

Mountford had excused himself from accompanying Urquhart to the river, and had left Sibyl and her inseparable companion sauntering together on the terrace outside the breakfast-room, perhaps waiting for him to propose river, or sea, or moorland ramble. Whatever they might have intended, Brandon Mountford

left them to their own devices, and went straight to his room, where he began the prosaic task of folding his clothes, and disposing them in the two well-worn portmanteaux, which smelt of tar and sea-water; and of looking over and packing his supply of flies and tackle, thinking with a despairing mournfulness of the river which he might never fish again. Never had he been so happy—or so unhappy—as at Ellerslie. He paused in his morning's work once as he crossed the room, arrested by his own image in the cheval glass. He stopped to survey himself, deliberately, from top to toe, looking at himself with the smile of bitterness, the smile that curls the lips with an upward curve, while the eyes remain fixed and gloomy.

“Not half a bad-looking fellow,” he commented scornfully, “tall, well set up, a broad forehead, a bold, well-opened eye, features fairly regular, skin without a blemish.”

And then he took a book from the pocket of his portmanteau—a thin, cloth-bound octavo

—and opened it at a page which had been read often enough for the volume to open of its own accord at that particular place.

This was the passage he had marked with the broad, heavy stroke of a red pencil :—

“Characteristics—turgescence of face, distortion of mouth and eyes, immobility of pupil, bloody froth issuing from mouth. This is the usual attack, or the grand mal.”

“Not much room for a man to be vain of his looks who is subject to such a transformation as that,” he said to himself, as he put the book back into its hiding-place.

He had bought this exhaustive treatise upon his malady, by a specialist, after his first attack, and had read and re-read the dismal details so coldly, so plainly described, not for the study of the sufferer, but for the calmer intelligence of the healer, the man of science, to whom the most revolting or the most fatal of maladies is only an interesting study, more interesting as it becomes more terrible.

He had read the whole history of this strange disease. He had read of individual cases, and their abnormal developments. He had hung with a grisly fascination over the story of the unhappy victim, who, after suffering from epilepsy in its normal form from his childhood, at seven and twenty years of age suffered a sudden change in the nature of his malady, and became the victim of a murderous instinct which he resisted with the greatest difficulty, wrestling with himself as the demoniacs of old wrestled, fighting against the savage thirst for bloodshed which urged him to slay even his nearest and dearest, the mother he loved, the father he had honoured and obeyed all his life.

That story of horror had cut itself into Brandon's brain. What if over his distorted mind that same fierce thirst of blood should come—suddenly, like a fiery atmosphere steeping his senses—suddenly, like the branding heat of the tropical sun leaping out of a

tempestuous sky? There was no reason why he should not suffer a change as terrible as that which had made this Swabian peasant's life an existence of fear and trembling.

Horror unutterable, to have won the woman he loved, to have promised to care for her and cherish her, to be trusted and loved by her; and after a year or so of bliss to wake one day a creature of demoniac impulses, transformed from man to devil, yet knowing himself man, fighting against his evil genius, conscious of his criminal instincts, yet unable to conquer them, unable to save himself from his own insane longings, and seeing the wife he worshipped fall at his feet, his idol and his victim.

The horror of the thought was strong upon him as he sank into a chair by the bed, and buried his face in the pillows. It was foolish to have opened that accursed book, he told himself, a book not intended for the lay mind. What good could it do to him to read of

extreme cases? His was not an abnormal type of epilepsy—might never become severe or exceptional, although his mother's history had been of the saddest. He bore no resemblance to his mother, physically. She had been fragile and delicate, pale, ethereal. He was strongly built, like his father, tall, and broad shouldered, hardy and active. He had been living down the danger of inherited malady ever since those first threatenings of evil. No, he would not be such a coward as to dwell upon hideous forebodings. He would make that one sacrifice which honour and conscience demanded of him. He would live and die a stranger to those domestic ties which make so large a portion of man's happiness; but he would not darken his solitary existence by brooding over darkest possibilities.

He would call Christian philosophy to his aid. He would not look beyond the evil of to-day, towards the potential misery of the coming years.

Argue with himself as he might, the opening of that too familiar book had unhinged him. He left his packing half finished, and went down to the drawing-room whence he had heard the sound of the piano, and two fresh young voices in an Italian duet, which he knew well as a favourite with the two girls. The gong sounded for luncheon as he entered the room, and Sibyl rose from the piano. They all three went together to the dining-room, and sat down a triangular party. Sir Joseph had gone to Carlisle on railway business, and Urquhart was spending the day on the banks of the river.

"I thought you were with Mr. Urquhart," Sibyl said to Brandon, "or that you would hardly have deserted us all the morning."

"I had some work that I was obliged to do. I was a martyr to duty."

"Letter-writing, I suppose. I know what a burden that is," Sibyl answered, lightly. "I could not spare one of my innumerable cousins,

but it weighs rather heavily upon me when they all want long gossipy letters. There is not much material for gossip at Ellerslie."

"No, I suppose you do find a dearth of incident sometimes," Brandon answered absently, his eyes looking down at his plate.

He ate hardly anything, and might be said to lunch upon a glass of claret and a biscuit—and he who had been accustomed to sustain the leading part in all their conversation to-day hardly spoke a word.

He looked up suddenly and found Sibyl's eyes fixed upon him, the fair young face full of anxiety. She blushed as their eyes met.

"Whatever your work was, I'm afraid it was too much for you," she said hurriedly. "You are looking very white and tired. Is he not looking ill, Marie?" she asked, with an embarrassed air, as if she wanted to cover her own too anxious regard for his welfare by making it a general question.

"I daresay Mr. Mountford feels the sudden

change to summer heat as much as the rest of us," Marie Arnold answered, "but whatever his sufferings may be, he ought to be flattered at finding himself the object of such solicitude on your part."

Sibyl gazed at her in wondering distress—could this be Marie, Marie who had loved her with more than a sister's affection? Marie, her slave, her worshipper, whose sympathy had never been wanting in her life till within these last few weeks, when an inexplicable change had been coming over her?

They sat in silence till the end of the meal—an idle formula for all three. They rose in silence, and Sibyl walked listlessly to an open window on her way to the garden, while Marie went quickly out at the door, so quickly that Brandon had no time to open it for her. He followed Sibyl to the garden, overtook her on the terrace, and walked by her side, slowly and for the most part dumbly, to the sunk lawn, where the girls often played tennis.

“We shall have no tennis this afternoon, I’m afraid,” said Sibyl, obliged to talk about something, since her embarrassment made silence painful. “Marie is not in the humour for tennis.”

“She seems rather in an ungracious mood. Is she subject to that kind of outbreak?”

“She is a little impetuous and hot-headed at times, but she never used to be out of temper with me.”

“I fancy jealousy is at the bottom of the mystery, Sybil.”

“Jealousy?”

Sibyl echoed the word with lips that trembled faintly as she looked at him.

“Yes, Miss Arnold has one of those unhappy tempers in which affection takes its most exacting form. She loves you intensely, and she is jealous of the slightest kindness you show to anyone else. She sees that you are inclined to be my friend—to accept me as a kinsman—almost as a brother——”

“Almost as a brother,” Sibyl echoed, in a whisper so faint as to escape Brandon’s ear.

“She saw your kind concern about my haggard looks, and she was angry that you should be anxious about anyone but herself. You must care only for her. She loves you with all her heart and mind—as we are told we must love God—and she wants all your heart and mind in return.”

“She has always been warm-hearted and affectionate, but she was never so rude and disagreeable as she was to-day.”

“No? It was hard that she should grudge me your kindly feeling to-day of all days, for it is my last at Ellerslie.”

He could not keep his eyes from her face as he made the announcement. He had meant to tell her nothing of his intentions till next day, and then to take a hurried farewell, to give no time for the betrayal of strong feeling on either side. But seeing her tender concern for

his health, so innocently indicated in her womanly speech at luncheon, his resolution had faltered, and he had abandoned the idea of getting over all difficulties by a brutal suddenness. No, he thought, it was better to tell her quietly, and if need were to explain his motives. He could not let her think that she was nothing to him, and that her love had been wasted on a stock or a stone.

Her face whitened, and after walking at his side in silence for a few minutes she sank helplessly upon the first garden seat to which they came, sank down without a word, and sat pale and dumb.

“The work which tired me this morning was the work of packing my portmanteaux,” Brandon pursued in a cheery voice. “I travel without a servant, and like looking after my own belongings. I have had a glorious time at Ellerslie, and I never can be grateful enough for your kindness, which has made the place as dear and as homelike as if I had been born

here, or for Sir Joseph's generous hospitality to a man who had no claim upon him."

"Oh, but you have a claim upon him—in his mind a very strong claim. You are my mother's kinsman, and he loves all whom she loved, or who belong to her by race and kindred."

"He is the most generous man I know. There are men in his position who might dislike me because I am the son of the man whose despairing, unspoken love was given to Lucy Mountford. You know my father's story, I daresay, Sibyl?"

"I know that he loved my mother, before she and my father ever met, with a love that could never be told, for he learnt to love her unawares—and too late. My father told me the story a year ago when he gave me some of my mother's jewels. It pleased him to talk to me about her, and her trustfulness in him.

"Yes, he loved her too late. That is the story, as common in Mayfair as the commonest announcement in the Court circular—'the Queen

walked on the slopes,' or 'the Queen will leave next week for Balmoral.'"

"My poor father's fate was a sad one—and he left a gloomy heritage to me."

"I don't understand—do you mean that he left you poorly provided for?" faltered Sibyl.

"Poorly provided for! Sibyl, do you think I am the kind of man to whine because I have to bear the burden of narrow means? I can cry with Othello—'Steep me in poverty to the very lips.' I can laugh at poverty—could fight the battle of life with the best of the rich men I know. The inheritance which darkens my life is a heavier cross than the pinch of poverty. My heritage is a malady which sets me apart from my fellow-men, and which has determined me to go down to my grave wifeless and homeless."

Sibyl listened silently, but her tightly clasped hands and the tears which trembled on her eyelids were enough to indicate her feelings. She had only one idea of hereditary malady, and

that was consumption. She had heard of those who were doomed in their cradles to early death; of lovely girls fading in the dawn of youth; of young men drooping and withering when life seemed fairest; victims of a fate which those who knew their family history had foretold from the beginning of the life-journey.

Faintly, timidly, she murmured words of hopefulness. "You look so strong, and you have led such an active life, Brandon. Surely, even if your father was consumptive, there is no reason that you should inherit——"

"Consumptive!" exclaimed Brandon, catching at the word. Yes, it was better for him that she should believe the hereditary taint to be that—only phthisis—a disease which has always an interesting aspect to the lay mind—the gradual decay, the fatal beauty of hectic colouring and lustrous eyes. Far better that she should think him the foredoomed victim to consumption than that he should be forced to explain the horrible truth, to trouble her imagi-

nation with hideous images. "I have accepted my fate, Sibyl," he went on. "It is only within the last few weeks that I have felt the cruelty of my destiny,—but I should be something less than a man if I were to ask the girl I love to share my burden."

"If she really loved you she would wish to share it—to be your nurse and comforter, should your fears ever be realised, or to help you to forget that you have any cause for fear—until, perhaps, you and she would be able to look back in the time to come, and smile at your past fears."

"No, no, Sibyl, that is an alluring picture. Great God, what a world of happiness you spread before me with a few little words. No, Sibyl, such happiness is not for me. I have to carve out a sterner path for myself—to be content with a life of adventure—to find my companions and pleasures in scenes so shifting and varied that the tasks and dangers of my daily existence will crowd out regretful memories,

and leave no time for brooding upon that which might have been. I have made up my mind. I shall never marry."

"I have no doubt it will be easy for you to adhere to that resolution," Sibyl said, with an assumed lightness, wounded to the quick by a speech which to her own mind implied a rejection of her sympathy. "You are fond of a life of adventure; and if you do not care for anybody, and are not likely to care——"

"If I do not care! Oh, Sibyl, you know as well as I do—you must surely know—how much I care; how entirely my life has slipped out of my own keeping and has become dependent for all its sunshine upon another life. Why should we fence with facts, and make elaborate speeches to each other as if we were strangers, as if it were not in our blood to care for each other—you, the child of the woman my father adored, and who gave him her love, not knowing that he was fettered and bound? I had made up my mind to leave this place with my story

untold; to carry my secret—if it should be a secret—away with me into the wilderness, to bury it there in the explorer's shifting camp. All my plans were made for a sudden departure to-morrow morning without a word of love or sorrow; but one little look of yours just now at luncheon was enough to alter every plan, break down every determination. I resolved that you should at least know how dearly you are loved, and how Fate has foredoomed your lover. I am glad Miss Arnold has given me a chance of saying all this to your ear only; but even had she been as watchful of you as she usually is, I must have spoken—even her presence could not have silenced me."

"If you really mean what you have said, if it is not mere idle flattery, perhaps meant only to spare me the humiliation of having seemed to care too much for you——"

"Sibyl, I have not spoken half the truth."

"I can't help believing you," she said naively.

"I hardly think you would be so cruel as to

deceive me. Yes, Brandon, I do believe that you love me, as truly and faithfully as I love you ; and I want you to understand that even at the worst, if you were destined to suffer long years of ill-health—to die while you are still young—in spite of all that love, and care, and wealth can do to save you—even if it were so,” she went on, brokenly through her tears, “I have no higher hope than to be your wife, your nurse, and your consoler, to lighten all the burdens of life for you, to crowd into those short years of yours all the happiness that this beautiful earth can give in its fairest places, under the brightest skies. Let me be your wife, Brandon. I know that you are poor, and that my dear father has other views—ambitious ideas which he will forget for my sake. He has only to know how much I care for you, and he will consent to anything I ask.”

“Stop ! for God’s sake, stop !” cried Brandon, starting to his feet, snatching away the hand upon which she had laid her own with a tremu-

lously fluttering touch. "You don't know what you are talking about. Hereditary phthisis is bad enough—a martyrdom for patient and nurse—a bitter pilgrimage towards an untimely grave, along a path beset with stones that wound and thorns that tear—not by any means the poetical fading from life which poets have taught you to believe; but phthisis is a kindly disease compared with the doom that hangs over me. My lot is the torment you have read of in the Gospel. I am the man possessed of devils; and there is no Divine Healer upon earth now to exorcise Satan's crew. The devils have it all their own way. Science has only found palliative measures, she has found no more, for the epileptic. He must bear his burden. As yet my malady has not shown itself at its worst, but the worst will come, no doubt, all in good time. I, too, shall be an interesting case—my paroxysms worthy to be recorded in the text books. God knows what form those latter phases may assume. It might be murder."

“Brandon! Oh, how can you say such things? It could never be! You are giving yourself up to groundless fears. I am not afraid——”

“Not afraid, even of devils? Ah, Sibyl, I know, I know! With good women love means a vocation for martyrdom. But I am not the man to accept such a sacrifice. My dear love, my dear, dear love, you have given me a memory to cherish and take comfort from in all the days of my life. You have made me ineffably happy; but my happiness must go hand in hand with renunciation. I must never more be your friend and companion, till the years have made us grave, elderly people, and I can be the homely, unobtrusive *ami de la maison*—a godfather, a *souffre-douleur* for your children. Let me kiss you, just once—the kiss of a long farewell; and then I shall be able to say—‘She has loved me—I have lived.’”

The words came in a torrent. The man

looked radiant, exalted by the passion of self-sacrifice.

Sibyl had risen from the bench, and was standing looking at him pleadingly, with parted lips that seemed to be struggling for words in which to oppose his decision. He caught her suddenly in his arms, and silenced those tremulous lips with a kiss.

“Once, and once only,” he said. “That kiss has to last for a lifetime.”

He released her from his arms, and looking up saw Marie Arnold standing a few paces behind Sibyl, as if she had suddenly stopped in her approach to them.

The look in her face chilled him—checked the rushing tide of passion. What a terrible face it was, pale to ghastliness, and with a livid look about the lips. If this was what jealousy made of the girl he remembered in the bright friendliness of their earlier acquaintance, jealousy must be indeed a fiendish passion.

Her expression changed as he looked at her,

but quickly as she controlled her countenance, he could see the effort it cost her to quiet those writhing lips, and summon up a pale, cold smile.

“I have been looking for you everywhere, Sibyl,” she said. “I wanted to know your plans for the afternoon.”

“I have no plans. I think you might allow me an afternoon to myself, without roaming about in search of me like an unquiet spirit.”

“An afternoon to yourself and Mr. Mountford, I suppose you mean?”

“Precisely. Mr. Mountford and I have a good deal to talk about on his last day at Ellerslie.”

“His last day!”

The words came in a gasp, and Marie’s large dark eyes turned to Mountford with a look of undisguised despair.

“Is that true?” she asked. “Are you really going away—to-morrow?”

“Yes, Miss Arnold; even the most delightful

visits must end. My visit to Ellerslie has been unconscionably long."

"But Sir Joseph doesn't know that you are going. I heard him begging you to stay till the end of the month—only yesterday."

"Sir Joseph is the soul of hospitality. He will know all about my plans to-morrow morning."

"He will be surprised, I think, when he knows all," answered Marie, with an open sneer.

Sibyl was walking towards the house. Marie followed her, leaving Mountford alone on the tennis lawn, looking idly along an opening in the shrubbery towards a sunlit patch of sea which glittered like a jewel far away at the end of the glade.

He walked and mused for nearly an hour. He did not want to be alone with Sibyl now that the last word had been spoken; still less did he wish to be in her company under the hawk-like gaze of Marie Arnold, whose manner

this afternoon had disquieted him beyond measure. There had been a passionate intensity which betrayed something more than jealousy of an adopted sister. Lightly as he esteemed his own powers of pleasing, he could hardly doubt after to-day that it was for him this strange young woman cared. Contiguity, her secluded life, which had brought her so seldom into the society of a man of her own age, had made her more impressionable than the common herd of girls, he told himself, and while all his thoughts had been absorbed by Sibyl, the elder girl had been nursing her foolish fancies, wasting her feelings upon one of those sentimental attachments which make the misery of the emotional temperament.

“She will fall in love with the next decent looking young man who comes to Ellerslie,” he thought contemptuously, setting the slightest value upon a regard which no look or word of his had ever courted.

He thought of Marie only as a foolish and

impulsive young person, whose persistent presence had bored him in his too brief hours of happiness, whose ill-humour of to-day had distressed Sibyl.

He returned to the house, after an hour's idle strolling, finished his packing, and then, finding it was only six o'clock, went back to the grounds, intending to walk to the river, and perhaps return with Hubert Urquhart, who had been studiously civil to him, and whom he had of late avoided with a persistence that might look like incivility. He knew that Hubert admired Marie, and it seemed to him that the best thing that could happen for Sibyl—if not the happiest thing for the girl herself—would be Marie's marriage with Mr. Urquhart. A young woman with such a temper as Marie had exhibited to-day would be a danger to Sibyl's peace, so long as she remained an inmate of Sir Joseph's house, and uncontrolled by the strong hand of a husband. The best thing for such a girl would be to marry, and

find her master, as she would inevitably do in Hubert Urquhart.

On this last day, Brandon had scrupulously avoided the afternoon tea hour in the drawing-room or on the terrace, an hour which he had hitherto enjoyed as almost the pleasantest in the tranquil gladness of his days at Ellerslie. After those passionate words and that farewell kiss he shrank from meeting Sibyl, till the family dinner should bring them together, when Sir Joseph and Urquhart, and possibly the curate, who often dined with them, would make sentiment impossible. In the family circle he and his dear love could meet and talk and bid each other good night, with the easy air of friends who were nothing more than friends.

A long bank of clouds piled up against the western sky had hidden the sun when Brandon went back to the shrubbery, and there was the suggestion of rain in the atmosphere. Urquhart and the gardeners had been sighing for rain, and now it seemed they were likely to have

their desire. The air was colder with the approach of evening, and Brandon felt the chilling change as he entered the little fir wood that sheltered Ellerslie from the north-western gales.

Under the dark foliage of the firs the grey of evening had already gathered, although sunset was still far off. Brandon was glad to find himself in that faded light, glad of the solitude, glad even of the gloom which hung about the long narrow alleys, cut through the monotony of the tall brown shafts. Heavier shadows crept over the irregular masses of undergrowth, rhododendron, berberis, and laurel, which made a darkness below in harmony with the darkness above.

A terrible depression of spirits had followed upon Brandon's exaltation of a few hours before. In those brief moments by the tennis lawn, when Sibyl was clasped in his arms, and their lips met in the farewell kiss, he had fancied that the mere knowledge of having loved her,

and been loved again by her who was for him the most perfect among women, would suffice for the consolation of his after life—that he could not be utterly unhappy, having been so beloved. But now his spirits had sunk into a gloom deeper than the sadness of the morning when a single page of that fatal book had reminded him of his miserable inheritance. A despondency more painful than he had ever known had taken possession of him within the last few hours, a despair that weighed upon him like an actual burden, as if a leaden hand—the gigantic hand of some monstrous being—were pressing down upon his brain. It was even worse than despair. It was abject fear, fear of he knew not what, a vague, inexplicable dread which chilled his blood, and slackened every nerve. He longed to be once more within touch of his fellow-man. He tried to quicken his pace, hoping to meet Urquhart returning from the river. It was along this woodland short cut that the fishermen generally returned.

Yes, Urquhart would come this way, soon perhaps—or it might be that it was too early for him.

Brandon tried to remember the hour, but could not even arrive at an approximate idea. Was it late or early—early afternoon, or evening? Or was this grey dimness the mysterious grey of dawn, before the sun is above the horizon? It was not an hour since he had paused in the hall to compare his watch with the eight-day clock, supposed to be an infallible timekeeper; and yet he did not remember if it were evening or morning. Even the memory of his impassioned scene with Sibyl had faded and grown shadowy. Was it only a dream, after all? He had dreamt that she had been kind, that she had confessed her regard for him, had offered to share the burden of his days. Yes, it must have been a dream. His whole existence seemed strange and dreamlike. He had no assurance of anything but the straight, brown shafts—like the pillars of a rude Indian

Temple—which rose up on every side of him—and even those looked dim and blurred as he gazed at them with eyes which slowly fixed themselves, and from which the faculty of sight slowly faded.

The leaden hand pressed harder and heavier upon his brain. He felt the dull beating, the agonising pain under that inexorable pressure. He staggered a few paces further, blindly, helplessly, struck his shoulder against a tree on the right hand, reeled to the left, and grazed his hand against a tree on the other side of the path, and then fell like a log, head foremost, in a tangle of arbutus and rhododendron, fern and brier.

Brandon Mountford's next knowledge of his own existence was a sharp, gnawing pain in his right shoulder, a pain that made him aware that he was lying in a wretchedly cramped position, with the greater part of his weight bearing upon the right arm and shoulder. He

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was aware, too, of a chilling rain, falling steadily through the darkness, a rain that must have been falling for some time, for the rhododendron bushes, through which his hands were groping in his struggle to raise himself, were dripping. It was pitch dark under the fir trees, not a star to be seen in the heavy blackness of the sky, to which he looked up wonderingly, again puzzled as to the lapse of time. Was it the darkness of evening, or of midnight? he wondered.

He got upon his feet with an effort, and stumbled a few paces forward, catching at the trees as he went, stumbled on a little way, weak in limb, confused in brain, and then stumbled against something lying in the fern at his feet, stumbled and fell on one knee, his extended hand clutching at the obstacle as he fell. His hand touched another hand, his fingers closed automatically on the soft fabric of a woman's gown, the silky softness of fine cash-

mere, such as he had seen Sibyl and her companion wear for tennis and boating, the material which both girls wore oftener than any other. Dim and clouded as his brain was after the long interval of unconsciousness, he knew the touch of that soft fabric. How often he had thrilled at the brief contact as he drew the folds of Sibyl's skirt away from the gunwale when she was seating herself in the boat.

Yes, even in that troubled half-consciousness his sense of touch recognised something associated with the girl he loved.

"Sibyl, Sibyl!" he called, with a hoarse, half-stifled cry.

He had no thought of any other than Sibyl. His clouded memory hardly recalled the existence of that elder girl who had been Sibyl's shadow.

In the darkness, under the cold night wind that was moaning in the fir trees, under the soft, rhythmical dropping of the rain, pattering on rhododendron and laurel, noiseless on bram-

ble and fern, he knelt beside that prostrate figure; he clutched that cold and stiffening hand.

There was just light enough for him to see the white gown, the white face staring upward.

Oh, God; was she dead?

He bent closer and closer, peering through the darkness, and suddenly a cry broke from his lips—a cry that was not all agony.

Surely that was dark hair that framed the whiteness of the face, not Sibyl's soft, fair hair. Or was it only the darkness of night that made the hair seem black?

Was she dead?

He tried to raise the lifeless form upon one strong arm, while he felt with the other hand for the beating of the heart. She had fainted, perhaps, and that icy rigidity of the fingers he had clasped was only the sign of a swoon.

Oh, God! this was verily death! No heart-throb beat below his trembling hand. There was nothing but the fluttering of his own quick-

ened pulse as he waited and listened, with his ear low down against the girl's breast.

"Not Sibyl," he kept muttering to himself.
"It is Marie—poor Marie—but why, how——"

He started from his knees with a shriek of horror. The hand that had been lying on her breast was wet and dabbled with blood. He knew the touch of that. For the hunter and the dweller in the wilderness there could be no uncertainty as to that thick and viscous fluid which covered his clammy fingers and trickled about his wrist.

CHAPTER IX.

“WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS?”

BRANDON MOUNTFORD'S senses were still confused by the horror of his discovery when he saw a light approaching slowly and indeterminately among the tall, dark fir trunks, now appearing, now disappearing, as the man who carried it moved circuitously about.

The position of the light—near the ground—and its oscillation, indicated a stable lantern. Whoever carried it, there was the promise of light—light, which in this crisis was the first element of helpfulness.

Brandon tried to call to the man, but his lips were dry and dumb, his convulsed throat could shape no sound. He wanted to shout his

loudest, but the effort produced only a hoarse whisper—and again he felt the iron hand pressing down his brain, benumbing every muscle, paralysing every nerve. His knees bent under him, and he sank at the side of the dead woman whose face he feared to see.

The dark hair, the dark hair! There lay his hope. It could not be Sibyl.

He stretched out a tremulous hand, and laid his cold fingers lightly over that colder countenance—trying to read those features as a blind man would have read them. He felt the smooth marble skin, the parted lips, the widely-opened eyes—but the blind man's sensitive touch was wanting. His hand told him nothing—it gave him only the dismal assurance of death.

And all this time the light went wavering in and out among the dark fir trunks—receding—advancing. Again he tried to shout, but the muscles of his throat were tightened to choking, and soundless.

Thank God the light came nearer—close.

Either his low moan of almost voiceless agony was heard, or the lantern had revealed that whiteness amidst the dark underwood—for the man came running to the spot with an exclamation of horror.

“Look here, Joe—she’s fainted—she must ha’ been lying here ever so long.”

The two men came closer—the lantern-light shone upon the dead face.

Yes, it was Marie Arnold.

A strange half-savage sound burst from Brandon’s lips—an inarticulate cry, which was almost a laugh. The relief, the rapture of knowing that this dead clay was not Sibyl, made him, for that one wild moment, utterly indifferent to the fate of any other woman upon earth.

“Lord help us! I’m afeard it’s something worse than a faint,” remarked the other man in a scared voice, while Tom held the lantern over the dead face, and the blood-stained whiteness of the gown, and then slowly turned

the light full upon the man who knelt beside the corpse.

"It's Mr. Mountford," he said, wonderingly. "Do you know anything about this piece of work, sir?"

"No," Brandon answered, like a man talking in his sleep.

"When did you find her?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, come, sir, you must know when you found her. Us two have been looking for her ever since nine o'clock. They're all in a dreadful way up at the house—and nobody knowed what had got you, neither. Miss Higginson was like mad with fright. She's been roving about the gardens for over an hour, hunting for Miss Arnold, and she only went back to the house to satisfy Sir Joseph. Come, sir, can't you throw no light upon this ghastly business? It looks terrible like murder."

The man looked from the marble face upon the ground to the living face staring down at it,

and almost as much like marble in its colourless rigidity. Darkest suspicions lurked in the minds of the two stablemen as they looked from the dead to the living, and back again from the living to the dead. With true north-country caution they suppressed all further exclamations, all comments on the hideous act and the wonder of it. But, with furtive glances at Brandon as he knelt by the corpse, they began in low voices, and with a matter-of-fact air, to discuss what ought to be done.

“Don’t move her,” said Tom Dane, the elder of the two stablemen; “she mustn’t be touched till constable has seen her.”

“Who’s to fetch constable?” whispered Joe, looking at Brandon.

“You’d better run to the stables, and send a lad on horseback, and then come back to me as sharp as you can. We mustn’t lose sight of him.”

The last sentence was in a whisper, but their caution seemed needless, for Brandon had the

look of a man who neither heard nor heeded the things around him.

"You ain't afeard to stop along of her?" asked Joe, also in a whisper.

"No, I ain't afeard. Look sharp, and send up to the house for Mr. Urquhart, same time, and bring him along here. He'll have to break it to Sir Joseph; poor old gentleman!"

"He won't get over it easy," muttered Tom Dane, standing with the lantern in his hand, looking down at the dead face, the white raiment, dyed with that dreadful stain which spread over breast and shoulders, changing the whiteness to a hideous red; dark, dull, loathsome to the touch, horrible to the sight.

He asked no further questions of the man he had found stooping over the corpse, and whose answers had been so strange as to alarm the least suspicious mind. His glances followed Brandon as he lifted himself slowly from his crouching position beside the corpse, and moved a pace or two backward. At the faintest sug-

gestion of flight the stableman would have laid violent hands on this guest of Sir Joseph's, of whom Tom Dane knew very little, save that he had always behaved as a gentleman in his relations with the stable, acknowledging every small service with a gentlemanlike tip, which was more than could be said of Mr. Urquhart.

Brandon moved no further than the nearest fir tree, and stood leaning against the rough brown trunk, inert and motionless, his eyelids lowered over the brooding eyes. He remained in the same listless attitude for an interval that seemed very long to Dane, who shifted and fidgeted about among the fern and brambles, and changed the position of his lantern every now and then, looking at the dead face as if he almost hoped to see life return to those clay-cold lineaments.

"What o'clock is it?" Brandon asked, suddenly breaking the silence which weighed upon Tom Dane's senses like a nightmare dream.

"Past ten, sir."

"Past ten! And I left the house before dinner. What have I been doing, where have I been? In this wood—this wood—all the time?"

The words were spoken dreamily, in vague self-questioning. Brandon was struggling against a headache which made speech agony.

Tom Dane put down the whole thing as a clever bit of acting.

"Oh, come now, sir," he cried, forgetting his determination to say nothing, "you know where you've been, and what you've been doing, and how this poor young woman came by her death. You know a good deal more about it than I should like to know. I don't ask you no questions, and I don't want you to commit yourself, as the saying is, but shamming ain't no good with Tom Dane. That cock won't fight."

Brandon looked fixedly at the speaker, but made no reply. That direct—yet vacant—gaze

was the look of one who hears without comprehending ; but the groom having made up his mind that this man was a murderer, saw only a studied assumption of lunacy.

The time seemed interminable to Tom Dane before his quick ear caught the rustling sound of footsteps among the thick growth of primroses and daffodils that carpeted the little wood ; and yet it was less than half an hour before Brennam reappeared, accompanied by Hubert Urquhart. They had run most of the way from the house, and both were breathless, the gentleman the more so, doubtless as the more sensitive in frame and temperament.

Urquhart bent down to look at the corpse, gingerly, as if fearing to spoil the spotlessness of his evening clothes by contact with that dead form, stained with the dark stream in which the young life had ebbed away.

“ Yes, it is Miss Arnold. Poor girl, poor girl ! What does it all mean ? What troubles could she have had to bring her to such a pass

as this? Why should she kill herself?" he muttered.

"I don't believe she did kill herself, sir," said Dane; "it looks a precious sight more like wilful murder than soocide, to my fancy. I didn't ought to be talking about my fancies, perhaps, but I've had an ugly time of it in this here wood, and a man can't help thinking when he's left face to face with a murdered corpse."

"Hold your tongue, Tom; you mustn't talk about murder."

"Very well, sir; I dessay you're right, but I shall think all the more."

Urquhart turned to Brandon, looking at him with keenest scrutiny.

"What do you know about this, Mountford?" he asked shortly.

"Nothing. I found her lying there. That's all I know. It was dark. I saw a figure in a white gown lying among the bracken. I thought at first," with a shudder, "that it was Sibyl. I could not see the face. It was only

when they brought the lantern that I was sure it was Marie Arnold."

"But where had you been all the evening? They waited dinner for you and Marie. I was late myself, but I was in the drawing-room at a quarter 'past eight, and we did not go to dinner till half-past. Where were you? What were you doing?"

"Where was I? Here, in this wood. What was I doing? Lying like a log—as unconscious as that poor dead girl. I can just remember falling against one of those trees, and then all was darkness. If there was thought or sensation in my brain, I remember nothing that I thought or felt."

"It was a fit of some kind, then, I suppose."

"Yes, it was a fit—not the first, but by far the longest lapse of consciousness I have ever had."

"I did not know you were subject to such things."

"They are not things a man cares to talk

about. But you needn't trouble about my malady; that is a minor detail, just now. What we have to find out is how this poor girl came by her death."

The clouds were clearing from his brain, and in manner and aspect he was rapidly becoming the Mr. Mountford of everyday life, whom Tom Dane knew and respected. Was he really recovering from an interval of lunacy, the stableman wondered; or had he made up his mind that shamming was useless now that keen, clear-headed Mr. Urquhart was here to investigate the hideous business?

"You had a lapse of consciousness, you say," said Urquhart. "Have you any idea how long it lasted?"

"No; I am not very clear on that point. I had been feeling ill ever since the morning; but I was worried, and my mind was too much occupied to allow me to take much notice of my own sensations. Had it been otherwise, I might have suspected that the fit was coming, might

have been wise enough to shut myself in my own room. But I had a good deal to think about, and I am a man who wants space and movement for thought. I may have roamed about the wood for a longish time. I know I rather expected to meet you on your way from the river. As for the time, all I know is that the sun had not gone down."

"Did you see anything of Miss Arnold while you were about in the wood?"

"No. The last I saw of Miss Arnold was when she and Miss Higginson left the tennis lawn together about an hour after luncheon. Have you finished your interrogation, Urquhart? I wonder you didn't begin by warning me that anything I might say would be used against me by-and-by."

"I wonder that you should wonder at my asking questions in the face of such a mystery as that," retorted Urquhart, pointing to the figure on the ground.

"A mystery. Yes, you are right there. It is

a mystery," said Mountford, pressing his hand upon his brow.

The troubled look came back to his face. When he dropped his hand from his brow there was a dazed expression in the dark grey eyes, and a nervous movement about the lips. He walked a few paces away, and seated himself upon a felled trunk which lay across the tangle of bracken and ivy. He rested his elbows on his knees, and let his head droop forward upon his clasped hands, and thus, in dead silence, waited for the next act in the tragedy.

Urquhart lighted a cigar, and walked slowly up and down a little bit of the pathway near which the dead girl lay. This narrow track between the fir trunks was not the most frequented way across the wood, but it was the nearest way from the river to the gardens, and it was the path which the salmon-fishers had generally used. The spot where Marie lay was not more than twenty yards from the footpath.

The village constable arrived, with a coast-

guardsman to help him in maintaining authority, should he find the situation too much for him single-handed. The groom had told him that they had got the murderer, and it would be his duty to take him into custody. There was a lock-up—a very old building close to the sea, which had done duty in the past chiefly as a place of detention for smugglers, and which still smelt of cordage and tar.

The constable approached the scene with a stolid, business-like air, and knelt down to investigate the attitude and appearance of that marble figure from whose aspect the other two men shrunk with a thrill of pain. It was a ghastly thing to see the deliberate way in which the official lifted the clay-cold hand, and noted the wounds on breast and shoulder.

“It’s a bad business,” he said, rising slowly, and looking from Urquhart, standing erect and tall at a few paces from the corpse, to Mountford, sitting in a crouching attitude, with his knees drawn up to his chin, pale as death, with

roughened hair, and soddened garments stained and blotched with moss and clay.

Urquhart had not stopped to put on an overcoat. He was in evening dress, smart and trim, shirt perfectly fitting, hair well brushed, hands showing white in the gleam of the lantern, a man evidently called away from the dinner table and all the amenities of life to be the spectator of this mysterious horror. The constable contemplated him with respect, not unmingled with admiration. How different a being looked this other man, sitting on the fallen tree, with brooding brow and lowered eyelids, and clenched hands in which the swollen veins showed like cordage—clenched, yes, and hideous with a stain which the constable's keen eye noted as he drew near with lifted lantern, examining Brandon Mountford with an insolently deliberate survey.

"What do you know about this, sir?" he asked roughly.

"Nothing," answered Brandon, lifting his

bloodshot eyes. "Nothing more than your own eyes can tell you. I found her lying there—as she lies now. An hour ago, two hours, three hours? I don't know. It seems an eternity. You are the third person who has questioned me."

"There'll have to be a good many more questions asked before this here business is done with," said the constable.

He stepped aside, and took counsel with Urquhart, keeping an eye upon Brandon all the time. He felt that this gentleman in evening dress, with calm and easy bearing, was a person in authority, and the best adviser he could have.

"Does Sir Joseph know?" he asked.

"Sir Joseph knows nothing. I shall go straight to him, when we have settled who is to carry—her—" he could not bring himself to utter the dreadful word which would better have described that burden—"to the house. I shall hurry on before and tell him."

"But we mustn't let him go, sir," whispered

the policeman, with a look which indicated Brandon.

"Let him go!" Urquhart echoed, with a movement of surprise. "Who says he wants to go?"

"Nobody, sir, but he might cut and run, you see. Things look very black against him. It'll be my duty to lock him up."

"Do you know who he is, man? Mr. Mountford, a cousin of Miss Higginson's!"

"I can't help that, sir, not if he was her brother. If he's done it he'll have to answer for what he's done. There can't be no favour in a murder case. I'm bound to arrest him."

"What, before the inquest?"

"Yes, sir. We mightn't be able to find him after the inquest. Cool as he seems, sitting there, waiting, his hands are all over blood. There can't be no doubt he's done it. He was out of the way all the afternoon, James coachman told me. He seems dazed like, but if ever there was guilt in a face, he's the man who did

it. I shall have to arrest him, sir. It's my duty."

"Then I suppose you must do your duty—but the thing is absurd. As for the stains on his hands—well, he found her lying there, and touched her, no doubt, in the surprise and horror of the discovery. You might just as well arrest me."

"He won't be locked up long if he ain't guilty, sir. The inquest will be to-morrow, I dare say, and then the truth may come out. I don't believe she did it herself, poor young lady."

"I am going to Sir Joseph. Do what you like—only make arrangements for the removal—to the house."

The request was accentuated by a shrinking glance towards the spot where Marie Arnold lay; and then Hubert Urquhart started on his errand of dread, and walked with rapid footsteps towards the shrubbery gate.

He had been, or had seemed, calm and

unshaken throughout the discovery of the crime, but at the thought of what he had to do cold drops of sweat broke out upon his forehead, and his knees felt weak and tremulous as he hurried unsteadily along.

"I don't like having to tell him," he muttered to himself. "It's hard lines for that old man. He was very fond of her."

Sir Joseph and Sibyl were at the end of the terrace nearest the shrubbery, evidently waiting for news of the missing. Was it about Marie or about Brandon that she was most anxious, Urquhart wondered, as he approached father and daughter.

"Have they found her?" Sir Joseph asked, eagerly.

There was no need that Marie's name should be spoken. There could be no question as to the subject of his anxiety.

"Yes—something has happened. I must see you alone," Urquhart answered in a low voice, putting his arm through Sir Joseph's

as he spoke, and drawing him gently away from Sibyl.

“What is it?” she cried, following them distractedly. “Why am I not to know? What has happened to them—to Brandon—to Marie? Speak out, Mr. Urquhart. I will know the worst.”

She caught hold of his arm. He had never seen her so agitated. She stood by his side, looking at him with questioning eyes, pale, breathless, resolute.

“Sir Joseph, for God’s sake—the truth is too horrible! I can’t, I can’t tell her——”

“Speak out, man!” cried Sir Joseph, fiercely. “Leave off torturing us. What is it? An accident—a calamity—is she hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Badly hurt?”

Urquhart nodded.

“Dead?”

“Yes!”

“O God, my poor girl, my beautiful Marie,

my sweet, kind loving girl! Dead! Great God in Heaven, how could she come by her death?"

"That is a mystery which will have to be solved. Brandon Mountford found her in the fir wood—stabbed to death. Whether it was suicide or murder——"

"It was murder—foul murder," cried Sir Joseph. "Why should she kill herself? She hadn't a care. She knew that she was loved, fondly loved, by an old man, who could deny her nothing. If she had not the first place she knew that she was very dear to me—she was content. Some incarnate devil has killed her. Where is she? Let me see her."

He rushed towards the path by which Urquhart had come, Urquhart following at his heels. Sibyl had sunk upon a garden seat, faint and helpless.

Dead! Did Death always come like this, as a hideous surprise, amidst the flush and warmth of life? Dead, murdered, they said.

But who could have killed her—who, in all this wide, wicked world, could have had any motive for murdering Marie Arnold?

Suicide? Yes, that was more likely. To Sibyl, who had youth's proud contempt for life—it seemed not impossible that Marie should have killed herself. She remembered that despairing look in her adopted sister's face, as she turned from Brandon to Sibyl in the garden; a look which to Sibyl, as to Brandon, had been a revelation. And if she loved him as Sibyl loved him, and knew that he was cold to her love, might not this passionate soul have revolted against the burden of life, and flung it off like a worn-out garment?

This was how youth thought of youth. Age argued that there could have been nothing wanting in a life so sheltered and cared for as Marie's had been.

The dismal procession came to a side door opening into a lobby at the bottom of the

servants' staircase. A mattress and a coverlet had been fetched from the nearest lodge, and the dead girl had been carried decently by four of the stablemen, while the constable and the coastguardsman had escorted Brandon Mountford to the lock-up.

"Did he make any fuss about going?" Urquhart asked Tom Dane.

"Not he, sir—went like a lamb—didn't seem to care what they did with him. I'm afraid it's a true bill, Mr. Urquhart."

"It looks bad, Tom; but there's no knowing."

This was on the terrace, after Tom's work was finished, and the dreadful burden had been carried to Marie Arnold's bedroom, the spacious and prettily furnished bedroom of which she had been so proud, a room full of gifts from Sir Joseph and his daughter. And now Sir Joseph was sitting by the bed, while the family doctor bent over the corpse, examining the wounds that had killed her.

"She didn't kill herself, Dewsnap?" ques-

tioned the old man, in a voice that was but just audible.

“Not she, Sir Joseph. She has been murdered — savagely murdered. There are three wounds—one near the collar bone—deep but not fatal—one piercing the right lung—one in the heart—instant death. Have they found the knife?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ah, I hope they will find it. A deer-stalker’s knife, or something in that line, I take it. Poor girl! A sad loss, Sir Joseph. My heart bleeds for you. Such a fine, handsome girl—cruelly sacrificed. I hope they’ll find the fiend who did it.”

The doctor laid the sheet lightly over the disfigured form, and drew near the mourner at the foot of the bed.

“You must try and bear up against this calamity, for your daughter’s sake, Sir Joseph.”

“For my daughter’s sake,” Sir Joseph re-

peated huskily, as the doctor crept noiselessly from the room, leaving him alone with the dead. "Yes, for my daughter's sake. Poor Marie! She was nobody's daughter—a working man's child—a waif, whom I adopted—and loved. I was very fond of her—my God, my God!"

He let his face fall forward on the coverlet at the edge of the bed, and sobbed aloud. Even yet, though she was lying there cold and motionless—though that which had been Marie Arnold lay within touch of his hand—he could not realise the fact of her death. Barbarously murdered; and three hours ago he had been walking up and down his drawing-room grumbling because she was late for dinner. This morning at breakfast she had opened his newspapers for him—opened and cut them and folded them in the way he liked, and had laid them before him, bringing her glossy dark hair close to his face as she bent to place the evening paper in front of his breakfast cup. He

had never doubted that he loved her; but he had never known till now how dear she had been.

“Great God!” he cried, springing to his feet, “bring me face to face with the man who killed her. There should be no mercy. Oh, let me see him held fast in the grip of the law—let me be sure that he shall swing for it.”

He rushed out of the room, ran downstairs and out to the terrace, like a madman. Urquhart, the doctor, and the stablemen were all clustered together, talking excitedly, but in undertones.

“Have they found the murderer?” asked Sir Joseph, going up to them.

“Nobody can know that yet awhile, sir.”

“Have they found any one—arrested any one?”

“Yes. They have taken Brandon Mountford to the lock-up,” answered Urquhart.

“Brandon Mountford!” repeated Sir Joseph, in blank amazement.

A low wailing cry sounded like an echo of Sir Joseph's loud exclamation, and a slim white figure rose out of the neighbouring dusk and came towards the group of men.

It was Sibyl, who had been forgotten in the horror of Marie's mysterious death. She had been sitting in the darkness, unobserved, unthought of, while the heavy footsteps crossed the terrace and went up the stairs with their dismal burden.

She came to her father's side, and laid her hand upon his arm. “Father, you won't allow such a shameful thing to be done. You won't let them bring disgrace upon Mr. Mountford—your friend—your guest. What could he have to do with her death? You'll send—you'll go to the village, and insist upon his being set at liberty instantly? You will, won't you, father? It is a disgrace to us that such a thing should have happened—our guest—my kinsman—so shamefully insulted.”

Her vehemence took her father by surprise.

He had never seen his daughter strongly moved before—knew nothing of her capacity for deep feeling.

“My child, it’s no business of mine. No interference of mine could have prevented it. Brandon Mountford! It’s a mistake, no doubt. He could have had nothing to do with her death. But she has been murdered, Sibyl—foully murdered. She has been murdered, and the ruffian who killed her must be somewhere—close at hand, perhaps—in hiding. It was folly to arrest Brandon Mountford and give the real murderer time to get away. Why was he arrested? Who put it into Coxon’s head to do such a thing?”

“Dane knows more about it than I do,” answered Urquhart. “He can tell you.”

Dane told his story with an air of conviction that chilled Sir Joseph’s blood. It was inexplicable—a hideous mystery.

Sir Joseph and his daughter heard how Mountford had been found kneeling beside the

corpse, his hands and clothes stained with blood; his manner agitated, hopelessly confused; unable to give any account of himself during the hours in which he had been missing.

"He was more like a lunatic than a man in his right senses," concluded Dane.

Sibyl heard and remembered Brandon's words of only a few hours before. He had painted in strongest phrases the horror of his hereditary malady. He had told her that there was no limit to the dark possibilities of that dread disease. He knew not what phase it might assume. It might be murder.

Yes, those were the very words which he had spoken, when he tried to cut himself off from her sympathy—a doomed wretch, worse than a leper, since with him physical malady might pass into moral delinquency—a creature beyond the pale of human love or friendship. And now she heard how he had been found with blood-stained hands beside the murdered girl, unable even to assert his innocence, allowing himself

to be led off to gaol without protest or remonstrance.

“He seemed to take it all for granted,” said Tom Dane.

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